



Georges Simenon

The Blue Room



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THE BLUE ROOM

Translated by Linda Coverdale



PENGUIN BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014
penguin.com

First published in French as *La Chambre bleue* by Presses de la Cité 1964
This translation first published 2015

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ISBN 978-0-698-40922-4

Cover photograph by Edouard Boubat / Gamma Legends / Getty Images

Version_1

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THE BLUE ROOM

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

The Blue Room was completed in 1963 and is one of the last novels Simenon wrote in Échandens castle in Switzerland, where he lived from 1957–1963. All his typescripts from this period were datelined ‘Noland’, his nickname for the peaceful, unassuming village which had become his home.



1.

‘Did I hurt you?’

‘No.’

‘Are you angry with me?’

‘No.’

It was true. At that time, everything was true, for he was living in the moment, without questioning anything, without trying to understand, without suspecting that one day he would need to understand. Not only was it all true, it was all real: himself, the room, Andrée still lying on the ravaged bed, naked, thighs spread, a thread of sperm seeping from the dark patch of her sex.

Was he happy? If anyone had asked him, he would have said ‘yes’ without any hesitation. It had not occurred to him to be angry at Andrée for biting his lip. That was part of it all like everything else and he stood, also naked, in front of the wash-basin mirror, dabbing at his lip with a towel moistened with cold water.

‘Is your wife going to ask you any questions?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Does she ever ask any?’

The words hardly mattered. They were talking for the pleasure of it, as one does after making love, bodies still flushed with sensation and minds slightly dazed.

‘You have a beautiful back.’

A few pink stains dotted the towel, and in the street an empty lorry bounced over the cobblestones. On the terrace, some people were talking. A few words were audible, here and there, without making complete sentences or any real sense.

‘Do you love me, Tony?’

‘I think so ...’

He spoke in jest but without smiling, because he was still patting his lower lip with the damp towel.

‘You’re not sure?’

He turned around to look at her and was pleased to notice that semen, his semen, in such intimacy with his companion’s body.

The room was blue, ‘washing-blue’ he had thought one day, a blue that reminded him of his childhood, the tiny muslin sachets of blue powder his mother dissolved in the washtub water for the final rinse, right before she went to spread the laundry out on the gleaming grass of the meadow. He must have been five or six years old and often wondered through what miracle the blue colour could turn the laundry white.

Later, long after the death of his mother, whose face was already fading from his memory, he had also wondered why people as poor as they were, dressed in patched clothing, attached such importance to the whiteness of their linen.

Were those things going through his mind at that moment? He would find out only later. The blue of the room was not just washing-blue, but the sky-blue of certain hot August afternoons as well, shortly before it turns pink, then red, in the setting sun.

It was August. The 2nd of August. Late in the afternoon. At five o’clock gilded clouds, as light as whipped cream, began to float up over the train station, leaving its white façade in shadow.

‘Could you spend your whole life with me?’

He had hardly noticed her words; they were like the images and odours all around him. How could he have guessed that this scene was something

he would relive ten times, twenty times and more – and every time in a different frame of mind, from a different angle?

For months, he would struggle to recall the slightest detail, and not always of his own free will, for sometimes others would demand it of him.

Professor Bigot, for example, the psychiatrist appointed by the examining magistrate, would keep after him about it, studying his reactions.

‘Did she bite you often?’

‘A few times.’

‘How many?’

‘All in all, we only met eight times at the Hôtel des Voyageurs.’

‘Eight times in one year?’

‘In eleven months ... Yes, eleven, since it all began in September ...’

‘How many times did she bite you?’

‘Maybe three or four.’

‘During intercourse?’

‘I think so ... Yes ...’

Yes ... No ... Today, actually, it was afterwards, when he had withdrawn from her and was lying on his side, looking at her through half-closed eyelashes. The light spilling all around them delighted him.

It was hot outside, in Place de la Gare, and hot as well in the hotel room bathed in sunshine, in a heat that seemed alive and breathing.

As he had left a gap some twenty centimetres wide when closing the shutters over the open window, they could hear the sounds of the little town; some were like the murmur of a distant choir while others, such as the voices of the customers on the terrace, were closer, crisp and distinct.

A little earlier, while they were both lost in wild lovemaking, those sounds had reached them and become one with their bodies, saliva, sweat, the whiteness of Andrée’s belly, the darker tone of his own skin, the blue of the walls, the diamond-shaped sunbeam cutting the room in two, a shifting reflection in the mirror and the odours of the hotel, which still smelled of the countryside – of the wine and spirits served in the main room, the ragout simmering in the kitchen, even the slightly musty fibre stuffing of the mattress.

‘You’re handsome, Tony.’

She said this to him every time they met, always when she was still lying there while he moved around the room, looking for his cigarettes in the pocket of his trousers flung across a straw-bottomed chair.

‘Are you still bleeding?’

‘It’s almost stopped.’

‘What will you tell her, if she asks about it?’

He shrugged, couldn’t see why that should worry Andrée. Right now, nothing seemed important to him. He felt good, in tune with the universe.

‘I’ll tell her I bumped into something. My windshield, say, from braking too suddenly ...’

He lit his cigarette, which had a special taste. When he reconstructed this conversation, he would remember another distinctive smell among all the others: the smell of trains. A freight train was manoeuvring behind the engine sheds, and the locomotive occasionally blew short blasts on its whistle.

Professor Bigot – short, thin, with red hair and thick, unruly eyebrows – would press him further.

‘Did it never occur to you that she was biting you on purpose?’

‘Why?’

Later, Maître Demarié, his lawyer, would bring it up again.

‘I think we might be able to use these bites to some advantage ...’

But again, how could he have thought about such things when he was completely caught up in experiencing them? Was he thinking of anything at all? If so, then he wasn’t aware of it. He was answering Andrée off the top of his head, carelessly, in a light, teasing tone, convinced that such words had no weight and would therefore leave no lasting impression.

One afternoon, during their third or fourth assignation, after telling him that he was handsome, Andrée had added, ‘You’re so handsome that I’d like to make love with you in front of everyone, in the middle of Place de la Gare ...’

He had laughed but hadn’t really been surprised. When they were in each other’s arms, he didn’t mind keeping some slight contact with the outside

world, with sounds, voices, the flickering light on the walls and even footsteps on the pavement, the clinking of glasses on the terrace tables.

One day, a brass band had marched past, and they'd had fun making love to the beat of the music. Another time, when a storm had sprung up, Andrée had insisted that he throw the window and shutters wide open.

Wasn't it a game? In any case, he had seen no harm in it. She was naked, lying across the bed in a deliberately provocative pose. She made a point of behaving as provocatively as possible as soon as she entered the room.

Sometimes, after they had undressed, she would murmur with an obviously feigned innocence that was all part of the game, 'I'm thirsty. Aren't you thirsty too?'

'No.'

'You will be later. Ring for Françoise, why don't you, and order something to drink.'

Françoise, the maid, was about thirty and had been working in cafés or hotels since she was fifteen, so nothing surprised her.

'Yes, Monsieur Tony?'

She called him Monsieur Tony because he was the brother of her employer, Vincent Falcone, whose name was painted on the front of the hotel and whose voice they could hear on the terrace.

'You never wondered if she might have behaved this way through some ulterior motive?'

What he was living through – a half-hour, if that, just a few minutes of his life – would be broken down into images, detached sounds, peered at through a magnifying glass, not only by others but by himself.

Andrée was tall. That wasn't obvious, on the bed, but she was three or four centimetres taller than he was. Although she was a local girl she had the brown, almost black, hair of people in Italy or the south of France, a startling contrast with that smooth white skin gleaming in the light. She was amply proportioned, a little heavy, and her flesh was voluptuously firm, especially her breasts and thighs. At thirty-three, he had known many women. None of them had given him as much pleasure as she had, an

animal pleasure, complete and wholehearted, untainted afterwards by any disgust, lassitude or regret.

On the contrary! After two hours spent seeking the maximum of pleasure from both their bodies, they would remain naked, prolonging their carnal intimacy, savouring the contentment they now felt not only with each other, but with everything around them.

Everything counted. Everything had its place in a vibrant universe, even the fly perched on Andrée's belly that she watched with a satisfied smile.

'Could you really spend your whole life with me?'

'Sure ...'

'Really sure? Wouldn't you be a little afraid?'

'Afraid of what?'

'Can you imagine what our days would be like?'

Those words would crop up again as well, so lightly spoken today, so threatening in a few months.

'We'd get used to it in the end,' he murmured casually.

'Used to what?'

'To us.'

He was candid, innocent. Only the present mattered. A virile male, a highly sexed female had just enjoyed each other to the full, and if Tony ached a bit afterwards, the pain was healthy and satisfying.

'What do you know! The train's here ...'

It wasn't Tony who'd spoken, but his brother, outside. Intrigued, Tony had gone automatically to the window, to the slit of blazing light between the shutters.

Could anyone see him from outside? He didn't care. Probably not, because the room must seem dark to those outdoors, and, as it was one floor up, only his torso might show.

'When I think of the years you cost me ...'

'I cost you?' he replied playfully.

'Who was it who left? Me?'

They'd been in school together from the age of six. Only after they were both over thirty and married to others ...

‘Answer me seriously, Tony. If I became free ...’

Was he listening? The train had arrived, invisible behind the white station, and passengers were beginning to appear through the door on the right, where a man in uniform was collecting the tickets.

‘Would you free yourself too?’

Before leaving, the train blew its whistle so loudly that he couldn’t hear anything else.

‘What did you say?’

‘I’m asking if, in that case ...’

He had turned his face halfway to the blue of the room, the whiteness of the bed and Andrée’s body, but something he saw out of the corner of his eye made him look outside again. Among the anonymous figures – men, women, a baby in its mother’s arms, a little girl dragged along by the hand – he had just recognized a face.

‘Your husband ...’

Tony’s expression changed in an instant.

‘Nicolas?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is he? ... What is he doing?’

‘He’s crossing the square ...’

‘He’s coming here?’

‘Straight here.’

‘How does he seem?’

‘I can’t tell. He’s got the sun behind him.’

‘Where are you going?’

For Tony was collecting his clothes, his shoes.

‘I can’t stay here ... As long as he doesn’t find us together ...’

He wasn’t looking at her any more, wasn’t interested any more in her, her body, what she might say or think. In a panic, he darted one last glance out of the window and ran from the room.

If Nicolas had come to Triant by train while his wife was here, it was for an important reason.

It was cooler out in the dark staircase with the worn steps. His clothes over one arm, Tony headed up one floor, then down the corridor to a half-open door at the end. Busy changing a bed in her black dress and white apron, Françoise looked him up and down and burst out laughing.

‘Well, here’s Monsieur Tony! ... Did you have an argument?’

‘Hush ...’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Her husband ...’

‘He caught you?’

‘Not yet. He’s coming towards the hotel ...’

He dressed feverishly, listening hard, expecting to recognize the shuffling footsteps of Nicolas climbing the stairs.

‘Go and see what he’s doing then come and tell me, quick ...’

Tony was fond of Françoise, a brisk, sturdy girl with laughing eyes, and she returned the feeling.

Half the ceiling was on a slant, the wallpaper had a pattern of pink flowers, and a black crucifix hung over the walnut bed. In the blue room as well, a smaller crucifix hung over the fireplace.

He had no tie, and his jacket was down in the van. The precautions he and Andrée had been taking for almost a year were suddenly proving useful.

Whenever they met at the Hôtel des Voyageurs, Tony left his little van in Rue des Saules, a quiet old street running parallel to Rue Gambetta, while Andrée parked her grey Citroën 2CV in Place du Marché, more than 300 metres away.

Through the dormer window, he could see the hotel courtyard with stables at the end, where some hens were scratching for food. On the third Monday of every month, a livestock fair was held in front of the engine sheds, and many country folk still came to Triant in horse carts.

Françoise came back upstairs in no hurry.

‘Well?’

‘He’s sitting on the terrace and he’s just ordered a lemonade.’

‘How does he seem?’

He was asking the same question Andrée had.

‘He doesn’t seem like anything.’

‘Has he asked about his wife?’

‘No. But from where he is, he can watch both exits.’

‘Didn’t my brother say anything to you?’

‘That you should slip out the back and go through the courtyard of the garage next door.’

He knew the way. Going over a wall a metre and a half high, he would be behind the Garage Chéron, with its petrol pumps lined up on Place de la Gare, and from there an alley led to Rue des Saules, coming out between a pharmacy and the Boulangerie Patin.

‘Do you know what she’s doing?’

‘No.’

‘Did you hear any noise in the room?’

‘I didn’t listen for any.’

Françoise didn’t much care for Andrée, perhaps because she was fond of Tony and felt jealous.

‘You’d better not go through the ground floor, in case he goes to the toilet.’

Tony imagined Nicolas, with his bilious complexion and eternally sad or grumpy expression, sitting at a table on the terrace with his lemonade when he should have been behind the counter of his grocery store. He must have had to ask his mother to take his place while he was off in Triant. What reason had he given her for this unusual trip? What did he know? Who had told him?

‘Did you never think, Monsieur Falcone, about the possibility of an anonymous letter?’

The question had come from the examining magistrate, Maître Diem, a man so shy it was disconcerting.

‘No one in Saint-Justin knew about our affair. Or in Triant, either, aside from my brother, my sister-in-law and Françoise. Andrée and I were careful. She used to enter via the little door on Rue Gambetta, which opens

on to the foot of the stairs, allowing her to head up to the room without going through the café.'

'You're sure about your brother, of course?'

Tony could only smile at that question. His brother was like another self.

'And your sister-in-law as well?'

Lucia loved him almost as much as she loved Vincent, in a different way, naturally. Like the two of them, she was of Italian parentage, and family came before everything else.

'The maid?'

Even if Françoise was in love with Tony, she would never have sent an anonymous letter.

Diem had to look away, and the sunlight gleamed in his untidy hair.

'There's still someone ...' he murmured.

'Who?'

'Don't you see? Remember the words you recalled for me during our last interview. Would you like the clerk to read them back to you?'

Tony flushed, shaking his head.

'It isn't possible that Andrée ...'

'Why not?'

But that still lay far ahead. For the moment, Tony was following Françoise down the stairs, trying not to make the ancient steps creak, for the Hôtel des Voyageurs dated back to the days of the stagecoaches. He paused a moment in front of the blue room but couldn't hear a thing. Did that mean Andrée was still lying naked on the bed?

Françoise led him down the corridor and around a corner, pointing to a small window opening on to the sloping roof of a shed.

'There's a pile of straw, on the right. It's quite safe to jump ...'

The hens squawked when he landed in the courtyard, and the next moment he was scaling the wall at the far end to find himself in a clutter of old vehicles and bits of machinery. A white-uniformed pump attendant was filling up a car in front of the station and never turned around.

Tony slipped away to the alley, which smelled of stagnant water at first and further on, of freshly baked bread, thanks to a ventilator behind the

baker's oven.

Finally, Rue des Saules, he slid behind the steering wheel of his lemon-yellow van, on which black letters spelled out:

Antonio Falcone
Tractors – Agricultural Machinery
Saint-Justin-du-Loup

A quarter of an hour earlier, he had felt at peace with the whole world. How to describe the deep uneasiness that had come over him? It wasn't fear, for he had had no reason to suspect anything was wrong.

‘Weren't you concerned to see Nicolas walk out of the station?’

Yes ... No ... A little, because of the man's nature, his habits, the way he was always worrying about his health.

To avoid crossing Place de la Gare, Tony went the long way round to reach the road to Saint-Justin. Near a bridge over the Orneau, an entire family was fishing in the river, including a little girl of six who had just landed her catch without any idea how to get it off the hook. Parisians, no question. In the summer they were everywhere; there were some at his brother's hotel, and a little earlier, in the blue room, he had recognized their accent on the terrace.

The road ran past wheat fields freshly harvested two weeks back, past vines, past meadows, where the tawny cows of the region were grazing, their dark muzzles almost black.

Some three kilometres along, Saint-Séverin was just a short street with a few farms scattered around it. Then he saw, to the right, Bois de Sarelle, a small wood named after the hamlet hidden behind the trees.

In September of the previous year, it was here, a few metres from the unpaved road, that it had all started.

‘Tell me about the beginning of your liaison ...’

First the sergeant, then the lieutenant of the gendarmerie in Triant and then an inspector of the Police Judiciaire in Poitiers had asked him these same questions before he met with Diem, the thin psychiatrist, and his

lawyer, Demarié, all in preparation for his interrogation by the presiding judge of the Assize Court.

The same words were repeated for weeks and months, by other voices, in other places, while spring turned into summer and summer into autumn.

‘The real beginning? We first met when we were three years old, because we lived in the same village, and we went to school, then we made our First Communion together ...’

‘I’m talking about your sexual relations with Andrée Despierre. Did they begin before?’

‘Before what?’

‘Before she married your friend.’

‘Nicolas was not my friend.’

‘Let’s say your classmate or, if you prefer, fellow student. Her last name was Formier, at the time, and she lived in the chateau with her mother ...’

It was not a real chateau. There had once been a chateau there, abutting the church, but only a few outbuildings remained. For perhaps a century and a half, doubtless ever since the Revolution, people had still been calling the place the chateau.

‘Did you ever, before her marriage ...’

‘No, Your Honour.’

‘Not even a flirtation? Didn’t you ever kiss her?’

‘It would never have crossed my mind.’

‘Why not?’

He almost replied, ‘Because she was too tall.’

And it was true. He could not have imagined this tall, impassive girl who reminded him of a statue ever making love.

Besides, she was Mademoiselle Formier, the daughter of Dr Formier, who had died during the wartime deportations. Was this explanation enough? He couldn’t think of any other reason. The two of them had not belonged to the same circles.

When they left school each afternoon with their satchels on their backs, she had only to cross the playground to be home, in the heart of the village,

whereas he and two friends walked on to La Boisselle, a tiny ‘three-hearth hamlet’ near the Orneau bridge.

‘When you came back to Saint-Justin four years ago, married and a father, and you built your house there, did you contact her again?’

‘She had married Nicolas and was running the grocery store with him. I bought something there now and then, but it was more often my wife who ...’

‘Now tell me how it began.’

He was driving past the place right now, at the edge of Bois de Sarelle. It wasn’t the day of the monthly cattle fair in Triant or the main market. Monday was the main market day, and there was a smaller market every Friday as well. He went to them regularly, because it was a good way to meet his customers.

Because of his health, Nicolas did not drive – the magistrate knew that. It was Andrée who drove the Citroën to Triant every Thursday to purchase goods from various wholesalers.

Every other Thursday, she stayed in town all day, adding a visit to the hairdresser’s.

‘You must have run into her often, during those four years?’

‘A certain number of times, yes. One always meets people from Saint-Justin in Triant.’

‘Did you usually speak to each other?’

‘In greeting.’

‘At a distance?’

‘At a distance, or more personally, it depended.’

‘There were no other contacts between you?’

‘I must have asked occasionally how her husband was, or how she was doing.’

‘Without any designs on her?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘This inquiry has revealed that in the course of your professional comings and goings you indulged in a certain number of amorous adventures.’

‘Yes, like everyone else.’

‘Often?’

‘Whenever I could.’

‘Among others, with Françoise, your brother’s maid?’

‘Once. For fun. It was more like a joke.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’d dared me, I no longer remember the pretext, and one day when I met her on the stairs ...’

‘It happened on the stairs?’

‘Yes.’

Why did they sometimes look at him as if he were a cynical monster and at other times, freakishly naive?

‘Neither of us took it seriously.’

‘Still, you did have intercourse?’

‘Of course.’

‘You never felt like doing it again?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Perhaps because, right after that, there was Andrée.’

‘Your brother’s maid didn’t resent you for this?’

‘Why would she?’

How different life is when one is living it from when one picks through it later on! In the end he was unsettled by the feelings they ascribed to him, no longer knowing how to tell the true from the false, wondering what separated right from wrong.

That encounter in September, for example! A Thursday, probably, since Andrée had gone to Triant. She must have been delayed, at the hairdresser’s or elsewhere, because she was going home later than usual, and it was growing dark.

As for him, he had been obliged to have a few glasses of the local wine with some clients. He tried to avoid drinking but in his job he could not always refuse a friendly round.

He was feeling fine, light-hearted, as he had been when standing completely naked in front of the mirror in the blue room, staunching the

bleeding from his lip.

He had just turned on his headlights when he spotted Andrée's grey Citroën by the side of the road, and Andrée, in light-coloured clothing, signalling him to stop.

Quite naturally, he had.

'It's a lucky thing you were passing by, Tony ...'

Later they would ask him, as if it were an indictment against him: 'You were already on familiar terms?'

'Ever since school, of course.'

'Continue.'

Whatever could the magistrate have been writing on the typed sheet of paper in front of him?

'She said, "I end up with a puncture the *one* time I haven't room for the jack and leave it at home! You've got one, right?"'

He hadn't needed to take off his jacket because it was still so hot that he wasn't wearing one. He remembered that his open-necked shirt had short sleeves and that his trousers were of blue twill.

What else could he do but change the tyre?

'Have you a spare?'

While he was working night fell, and Andrée stood near him, handing him the tools.

'You'll be late for dinner.'

'You know, in my line of work, that's not unusual.'

'Your wife doesn't say anything?'

'She knows it isn't my fault.'

'You met her in Paris?'

'In Poitiers.'

'She's from there?'

'From a village close by. She worked in Poitiers.'

'You like blondes?'

Gisèle was a blonde, with delicate, pearly skin that flushed pink at the slightest emotion.

'I don't know. I've never thought about it.'

‘I was wondering if brunettes scared you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because years ago, you kissed almost all the girls in the village, except me.’

‘I probably just didn’t think of it.’

He was kidding around, wiping his hands off with his handkerchief.

‘You want to try, for once, to kiss me?’

He had looked at her in amazement, tempted to say it again: *Why?*

He couldn’t see her clearly in the darkness.

‘You want to?’ she had repeated, in a voice he had hardly recognized.

He remembered the little red lights at the back of the car, the scent of the chestnut trees, then the smell, the taste of Andrée’s mouth. With her lips clinging to his, she grabbed his hand and guided it to her breast, which he was astonished to find so round, so heavy and alive.

And he had thought of her as a statue!

A lorry was coming, and, to avoid its headlamps, they drew back, still locked together, towards the ditch by the edge of the wood, where Andrée suddenly began to tremble the way no other woman he had known had ever done, leaning on him with her whole body and saying over and over: ‘You want to?’

They had found themselves on the ground, in the tall grass and nettles.

He told neither the policemen nor the magistrate. Only Professor Bigot, the psychiatrist, dragged the truth out of him, bit by bit: she was the one who had pulled her skirt up over her belly and bared her breasts, commanding him in a voice as hoarse as a death rattle: ‘Fuck me, Tony!’

In fact, it was she who had possessed him, and her eyes had gleamed with as much triumph as passion.

‘I’d never suspected she was like that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’d thought she was cold, haughty, like her mother.’

‘Afterwards, she wasn’t at all upset?’

Lying still in the grass with her legs wide apart, as on that afternoon in the hotel room, she had said, ‘Thank you, Tony.’

She had seemed to mean it. She had looked humble, almost like a little girl.

‘I’ve wanted to for so long, you see! Ever since school. You remember Linette Pichat, the girl with one eye a little crossed? It didn’t stop you from running after her for months!’

Linette now taught at a school in the Vendée region and every year came home to spend her holidays with her parents.

‘I caught you together, once. You must have been fourteen.’

‘Behind the brickyard?’

‘You haven’t forgotten?’

He laughed.

‘I haven’t forgotten because it was the first time.’

‘For her too?’

‘I haven’t a clue. I was too inexperienced to notice that.’

‘I hated her! For months, in bed at night, I racked my brain for ways to make her suffer.’

‘Did you find any?’

‘No. I settled for praying that she’d get sick or be disfigured in an accident.’

‘We’d better be getting back to Saint-Justin.’

‘Wait a moment, Tony. No! Don’t get up. We have to find a way to meet somewhere else. I go to Triant every Thursday.’

‘I know.’

‘Maybe your brother ...’

The magistrate would later conclude: ‘In short, as of that evening, it was all settled?’

It was hard to tell if he was being ironic.

On 2 August, the magistrate had not yet entered his life, and Tony drove on home. Night had not yet fallen, as it had in September. The sky was only just beginning to glow red in the west, and he had to dawdle a long time behind a herd of cows before he could pass them.

A village in a hollow: Doncœur. Then a gentle slope, more fields, meadows, a vast stretch of sky and, after a rise in the road, the sight of his

brand-new house, of pink brick, with the sun reflecting off one window, his daughter Marianne sitting on the doorstep and, at the far end of the property, the silvery shed where he stored farm machinery had his name emblazoned on it, just as it was on the van, which Marianne had already spotted in the distance.

Twisting around, she must have been announcing into the house, 'It's Pop!'

She refused to say 'papa' like the other children and sometimes as a game (and perhaps because she was jealous of her mother) she called him Tony.



2.

Halfway up a hill on the left was his house, surrounded by its garden, separated by a field from the old, grey, slate-roofed house of the Molard sisters. Beyond it were the smithy and finally, a hundred metres further down, the village, with real streets, terrace houses, shops and small cafés. The local people preferred to call it a market town, however, a large one of 1,600 inhabitants, not counting the three adjoining hamlets.

‘You been fighting, Pop?’

He had forgotten Andrée’s bite.

‘Your lip’s all swollen.’

‘I bumped into something.’

‘What?’

‘A lamp-post, in Triant. That’s what happens when you forget to watch where you’re going.’

‘Mama! Pop bumped into a lamp-post ...’

His wife came out of the kitchen in a small-checked apron and carrying a saucepan.

‘Is that true, Tony?’

‘It’s nothing, as you can see.’

Mother and daughter looked so much alike that, when they stood side by side, it sometimes startled him.

‘It wasn’t too hot for you today?’

‘Not really. Now I have to finish some work in the office.’

‘Can we eat at 6.30?’

‘I hope so.’

They ate early because Marianne went to bed at eight o’clock. She had her own apron with little blue checks. She had just lost two front baby teeth, and the gaps gave her an almost pathetic expression. It was as if, for a few weeks, she were a child and a little old woman at the same time.

‘Can I come with you, Pop? I promise not to make a noise.’

The office, with its pine shelves full of green boxes and piles of brochures, looked out on the road, and Tony was anxious to see the Citroën go by.

Next door was what the architect had called the living room, the largest room in the house, intended to serve as both dining and sitting rooms.

During the first week they had discovered that it simply wasn’t practical for Gisèle to shuttle back and forth with the dishes, leaving the table to check food on the stove, and they had decided to eat in the kitchen.

That room was large and cheerful. The scullery was used for washing and ironing. Everything was well planned, remarkably clean, never untidy.

‘Your wife, I take it then, could be called an excellent housekeeper?’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Is that why you married her?’

‘When I married her, I didn’t know that.’

Things had developed in three stages, actually, if not four. The first in Saint-Justin, in his house, when the police sergeant, then the lieutenant, had hounded him with questions he found baffling. Then it was Inspector Mani’s turn, in Poitiers: he specified dates, compared times, reconstructed Tony’s comings and goings.

At first no one was interested in his thoughts and outlook – especially not the police, or perhaps they simply found his private life unsurprising and basically like their own. With Diem and then the psychiatrist, even his lawyer, all that would change. Whenever Tony appeared before the examining magistrate, for example, he arrived from prison, in the police

van that would soon ferry him back there, whereas the magistrate went home for lunch or dinner.

It was Diem who made him the most uneasy, perhaps because they were about the same age. The magistrate was a year younger than Tony and had been married for a year and a half. His wife had just had their first baby. The magistrate's father, not a rich man, worked as an office manager in the Social Security Department, and Diem had married a typist. They lived in a modest apartment, three rooms and a kitchen, in the newest neighbourhood in town.

Shouldn't they have been able to understand each other?

'What was it, exactly, that frightened you that night?'

What answer could he give! Everything. Nothing in particular. Nicolas hadn't turned the shop over to his mother and taken the train for no good reason. He hadn't come to Triant just to sit at a little table on the terrace of the Hôtel des Voyageurs and drink some lemonade.

When Tony had left the blue room, Andrée was still naked on the bed and showing no sign of going anywhere soon.

'Did you consider Nicolas a violent man?'

'No.'

He was, however, a sick man who had been morose and withdrawn ever since childhood.

'Did you wonder, in Triant, if he might be armed?'

He hadn't thought of that.

'Were you afraid for your family?'

They weren't managing, he and Diem, to use words that meant the same thing to them both, to place themselves on the same footing. They were always a little out of step with each other.

Pencil in hand before a pile of invoices, he pretended to work, now and then placing a meaningless cross next to a number to look busy.

Sitting at his feet, his daughter was playing with a toy car that had lost a wheel. Beyond the lawn and the white fence, he could see the road about twenty metres away and, across a meadow, the backs of some village houses, their yards and small gardens where dahlias were in bloom. In one

spot an enormous yellow sunflower with its black heart stood out brightly against a grey wall, near a barrel.

When he had come home, he had automatically checked the clock: 5.45. At 6.20, Gisèle came to ask him, 'Can I start serving now?'

'Maybe a little later. I'd like to finish this before dinner.'

'I'm hungry, Pop!'

'It won't take long, my pet. If I'm late, you'll sit down to eat with Mama.'

It was around then that he felt flooded by a panic unlike what he had felt earlier, when clutching his clothes and dashing upstairs in the hotel. This was a heart-wrenching, bodily anguish, an abrupt rush of fever that forced him to go and stand by the window.

When he lit a cigarette, his hand trembled. His legs felt shaky. A presentiment? He spoke to the psychiatrist about it – or, rather, Professor Bigot persuaded him to discuss it.

'That had never happened to you before?'

'No. Not even when by some miracle I survived a car accident unharmed. And yet that time, when I came to, sitting in a field without a scratch, I began to cry.'

'Were you afraid of Nicolas?'

'I always found him disturbing, somehow.'

'Even back in school?'

As luck would have it, just before 6.30, the Citroën appeared at the top of the rise. It drove past the house with Andrée at the wheel, her husband beside her, and neither of them looked in his direction.

'Ready when you are, Gisèle ...'

'Then dinner is served. Go and wash your hands, Marianne.'

They had begun their evening meal as usual: soup, a ham omelette, salad, a camembert and some apricots for dessert.

Outside the windows lay the kitchen garden the couple tended together, where Marianne crouched for hours, pulling up weeds.

The runner beans had reached the top of their poles. Behind the wire fencing of the hen-house at least a dozen white Leghorn hens were pecking

away, and there were shadowy forms in the rabbit hutches.

The day seemed to be winding down like any other summer day. A mild breeze came in through the open window, with an occasional breath of cooler air. Fat Didier the blacksmith was still busy at his forge. Nature was calm and settling in for the night.

Professor Bigot's questions almost always came out of the blue.

'Did you have the feeling, from that evening on, that you had lost her?'

'Who? Andrée?'

He was nonplussed, because he hadn't thought of that at all.

'You'd been caught up, for eleven months, in what can certainly be called a grand passion ...'

And that was not how he would have described it. He desired Andrée. After a few days without her, thoughts of their tumultuous, ardent hours together would haunt him with memories of her smell, her breasts, her belly, her boldness. Sometimes he lay awake next to Gisèle for hours, tortured by incredible fantasies.

'What do you think about going to the cinema?'

'What day is it?'

'Thursday.'

Gisèle was a little surprised; they usually went to the cinema once a week, in Triant, just twelve kilometres away.

On other evenings, Tony would work in his office while his wife washed the dishes, then joined him to sew or darn socks while he worked. Now and then they would pause to chat briefly, almost always about Marianne, who would be starting school in October.

Once in a while, they would sit in front of their house, gazing out at the gathering dusk, the red and grey roofs in the moonlight, the dark mass of the trees with their barely whispering leaves.

'What's showing?'

'An American film. I saw the poster, but can't remember the title.'

'If you want to go ... I'll tell the Molards.'

When they went out in the evening, one or both of the Molard sisters came to stay with Marianne. The eldest, Léonore, was thirty-seven or -

eight; Marthe was a bit younger, but they seemed of no particular age and would turn into old maids without anyone even noticing.

Both had round, moonlike faces with indistinct features and wore the same dresses, the same coats, the same hats, as some twins do.

Often they were the sole worshippers at the seven o'clock mass, where they took communion every morning, and they never missed vespers or benediction.

It was they who helped Father Louvette in the church, putting flowers on the altars, tending the cemetery, and they again who sat up with the dying and laid out the dead.

They were seamstresses, and passers-by could see them working through their front window, where a big café-au-lait cat often lay napping on the sill.

Marianne did not like them.

'They smell bad,' she said.

They did indeed have a particular odour about them, the one found in churches and dry-goods stores, plus a hint of the smell in sickrooms.

'They're ugly!'

'If they weren't here to take care of you, you'd be left alone in the house.'

'I'm not scared.'

Gisèle smiled her own little smile, a faint one that barely curved her lips, as if she were trying to keep it to herself.

'You ascribe that to her sense of discretion?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'What do you mean by that? Able to keep a secret?'

More words!

'That's not how I think of it. She didn't like to be noticed. She was afraid of taking up too much room, of disturbing people, of asking them any favours.'

'Was she already like that as a child?'

'I believe so. After a film or a dance, for instance, she would never have admitted that she was thirsty, so that I wouldn't have to spend more money.'

'Did she have women friends?'

‘Only one, a lady neighbour older than she was, with whom she took long walks.’

‘What attracted you to her?’

‘I don’t know. I never asked myself that.’

‘Did she seem safe and reassuring?’

Tony stared at the magistrate’s face, trying to understand.

‘I thought she would make ...’

He couldn’t find the right word.

‘A good wife?’

That wasn’t quite it, but he sighed and said, ‘Yes.’

‘Did you love her?’

And when there was no answer: ‘Did you want to sleep with her? Did you go to bed with her before your marriage?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t desire her?’

He must have, since he married her.

‘And she? Do you think she loved you or that it was the marriage itself that appealed to her?’

‘I don’t know. I think ...’

What would the magistrate have replied if he had asked *him* the same question? They made a good couple, that’s all. Gisèle was tidy, energetic, unassuming, the perfect housewife in their new house.

He was glad to come home to her in the evenings and until Andrée he had never had any serious affairs, even if he did take advantage of the odd opportunity.

‘You maintain that you never considered a divorce?’

‘It’s the truth.’

‘Not even during these last few months?’

‘Not for one moment.’

‘Yet you told your mistress ...’

Then Tony suddenly raised his voice, even banged his fist on the little magistrate’s desk without realizing it.

‘But that’s just it, I never actually said anything! She was the one talking! She was naked on the bed. I was naked in front of the mirror: we’d just, the two of us ... I mean, you know this as well as I do. In such moments, who worries about words? I could barely hear what she was saying. Listen: for a good long while, I was watching a bee ...’

He suddenly recalled the bee: he had even opened the shutters wider to let it fly out.

‘I was nodding or shaking my head while thinking of other things ...’

‘What, for example?’

It was too discouraging. He couldn’t wait to get back to his prisoner cage inside the police van, where no one asked him any questions.

‘I don’t know.’

While Gisèle dashed next door to alert the Molard sisters, Tony put Marianne to bed, then showered and changed his underwear, as he did whenever he had seen Andrée in Triant. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs.

‘If we have more children, we can put the boys in one bedroom and the girls in the other,’ Gisèle had said when they were discussing the new house.

After six years, they still had only Marianne and had used the third bedroom just once, when Gisèle’s parents had visited Saint-Justin during the holidays.

They lived in Montsartois, six kilometres from Poitiers. Germain Coutet, journeyman plumber, was a heavy man built like a gorilla, with a ruddy face, a booming voice, and he began every sentence with: ‘I’ve always said ...’ or ‘What I think is ...’

From day one it was easy to see that he envied his son-in-law, envied him his bright, orderly office, the modern kitchen and especially the gleaming shed where the machinery was kept.

‘Me, I still think it’s a mistake for a workman to branch out on his own ...’

He opened his first bottle of red wine at eight in the morning and drank all day long. He could be found loudly holding forth in all the village bistros and, although never drunk, would become increasingly categorical, even aggressive, as the day wore on.

‘Who goes fishing every Sunday morning? You or me? So there! Who has three weeks of paid holidays? And who doesn’t need to come home at the end of the day and bust his brain over a bunch of numbers?’

His wife – fat, passive, with a prominent stomach – never challenged him. Could that explain why Gisèle was so shy?

Towards the end of their stay, there had been some heated arguments, and the Coutets spent no further holidays in Saint-Justin.

After speaking to the Molard sisters, Gisèle had time to put away the dishes and even change her clothes. She barely seemed to move yet never appeared to hurry as she went about her chores, which got done as if by magic.

A last goodnight to Marianne, in the warm shadows of her room. Downstairs, the Molard ladies were already bending over their sewing.

‘Have a good time.’

It was all very familiar, a scene so frequently repeated that they paid no attention to it any more.

The engine started. Side by side in the front seat of the van, they left the village behind, where someone was working late in his garden while most others, sitting on chairs in front of their houses, were taking quiet advantage of the cool evening air, a few listening to a radio playing somewhere behind them in an empty room.

They drove in silence at first, lost in their own thoughts.

‘Tell me, Tony ...’

When she paused, he felt a pang in his heart and wondered what would come next.

‘Don’t you think that for some time now Marianne has been looking a touch pale?’

Their daughter had always been thin, with long arms, long legs, and her complexion had never been rosy.

‘I spoke to Dr Riquet about it earlier today, when I ran into him coming out of the grocery store ...’

Hadn’t she been surprised to see that Nicolas had vanished, leaving his mother behind the counter? Hadn’t she thought it strange?

‘As he says, we have nice fresh air, but children need change. He suggests that, when we can, perhaps next year, we should take her to the seaside.’

He startled himself with the speed of his reply.

‘Why not this year?’

She hardly dared believe it. Summer was Tony’s busiest season, so they hadn’t taken a single holiday since their move to Saint-Justin. They’d spent their savings on the property, but they would be paying off the house and machinery shed for a few years yet.

‘You think we could?’

Once, the first year of their marriage, while they were still in Poitiers, they had spent two weeks at Les Sables-d’Olonne, renting a furnished room from an old woman, where Gisèle cooked their meals on an alcohol stove.

‘It’s already August. I’m afraid there won’t be anything left.’

‘We’ll go to the hotel. You remember that hotel, at the very end of the beach, a little before the pine woods?’

‘Les Roches Grises. No! Les Roches Noires!’

They had dined there one night on an enormous sole to celebrate Gisèle’s birthday, and the Muscadet had made her a little tipsy.

Tony was happy with his decision: he would be cutting off contact with Andrée and Nicolas for a while.

‘When do you want to ...’

‘I’ll tell you later.’

Before being absolutely sure about this holiday and choosing specific dates, he would have to speak to his brother. It was in order to see Vincent, in fact, that he was taking his wife to the cinema. He drove past the Hôtel des Voyageurs without stopping and turned into Rue Gambetta, where he found a parking space right outside the Olympia. On the pavement, one

could tell the Parisians from the local people by the way they dressed, the way they walked and gazed at the lighted shop windows.

Tony and Gisèle always took the same seats, in the balcony. During the intermission after the newsreels, documentary and cartoon, he suggested, 'How about a beer at Vincent's place?'

The terrace tables were almost all occupied, but Françoise found one for them and wiped it with her cloth.

'Two beers, Françoise. Is my brother here?'

'At the bar, Monsieur Tony.'

Inside the café, men were playing cards in the yellowish light, regulars whom Tony had seen a hundred times sitting in the same corner, with the same customers to watch and comment on each play.

'Well?'

His brother answered in Italian, which was unusual, for they'd been born in France and had spoken Italian only with their mother, who had never managed to learn French.

'I'm not exactly sure what happened. I have the feeling that everything's fine. He was there, on the terrace ...'

'I know. I saw him from upstairs.'

'Ten minutes after you left, she came down, relaxed, as if she hadn't a care in the world, and crossed the café calling out: "Do thank your wife for me, Vincent ..." She was speaking loudly enough for her husband to hear. She left the same way, carrying her handbag. Just as she reached the corner of Rue Gambetta, she suddenly seemed to notice Nicolas: "Well! What are you doing here?"'

'She sat down across from him, and I didn't hear the rest of their conversation.'

'Did they seem to be arguing?'

'No. At one point, she opened her bag and calmly applied fresh powder and lipstick.'

'How did he seem?'

'With him, it's hard to tell. You ever see him laugh, hmm? If you ask me, she got away with it, but if I were you ... Is Gisèle here?'

‘On the terrace.’

Vincent went to say hello to her. The air was mild, the sky clear. An express train went through the station without stopping or slowing down. In Rue Gambetta, Gisèle placed her hand on her husband’s arm, as she always did when out walking with him.

‘Is your brother pleased with how things are going?’

‘It’s been a good season so far. There are more and more tourists every year.’

Vincent had not had to buy the building, but only the business, because the landlord, who had run the hotel before him and had retired to La Ciotat, did not want to sell.

Starting with nothing, the two brothers had managed quite well for themselves and had already come a long way.

‘Did you see Lucia?’

‘No. She must have been in the kitchen. I didn’t have time to go and see her.’

He felt vaguely uneasy, and not for the first time. Gisèle knew he had been in Triant that afternoon, yet had not asked him if he had seen his brother.

At times he would have preferred that she ask him questions, painful though they might prove. Since she helped him with his bookkeeping at the end of every month, and thus knew all about his business, why wouldn’t she be interested in what he did when he was off at work?

Did she have suspicions she preferred to keep to herself?

They hurried back, for they could hear the bell inside the cinema signalling the end of the intermission, and others poured out of the little bar next door to join them.

It was only on the way home, in the darkness of the car, as the headlamps flared across black-and-white landscapes like the ones in the film, that he suddenly announced, ‘Today is Thursday.’

The word alone made him blush. Did it not evoke the blue room, Andrée’s voluptuous body, her spread thighs, her dark sex slowly oozing semen?

‘We could go on Saturday. I’ll phone Les Roches Noires tomorrow. If they have two rooms, or even one, and could supply a little bed for Marianne ...’

‘Can you leave your work now?’

‘I could dash back here once or twice if necessary.’

He felt saved, realizing only now the danger from which he had escaped.

‘We’ll stay there for two weeks, the three of us, lounging on the beach.’

Filled with a sudden wave of tenderness for his daughter, he blamed himself for not having noticed her pallor. He had wronged his wife, too, but through sins of omission. For example, he would never have been able to stop the car by the side of the road, take Gisèle in his arms, press his face close to hers murmuring, ‘I love you, you know!’

And yet, the thought had crossed his mind, he had often considered it. He had never done it. What was he ashamed of? Wouldn’t he have seemed like someone guilty and begging for forgiveness?

He needed her. Marianne needed her mother, too. And he had betrayed them both when Andrée had asked him her questions. True, he had listened to them only distractedly, patting his lip with the damp towel. They were coming back to him now anyway, with cutting clarity, and he could even weigh the silence of her pauses.

‘You have a beautiful back.’

It was ridiculous. Gisèle would never think of going into ecstasies over his back or his chest.

‘Do you love me, Tony?’

In the overheated room smelling of sex, such a question was only natural, whereas now, in the quiet night, as the van hummed along, the words and intonations became unreal. He had thought himself clever to reply grudgingly, ‘I think so.’

‘You’re not sure?’

Did he think he was playing a game? Didn’t he realize that for her, it was so much more than that?

‘Could you spend your whole life with me?’

She had asked that question twice in the space of a few minutes. Hadn't he already heard it during their previous encounters in the same room?

'Sure!' he had replied, flying high, light in body and spirit.

She had sensed so strongly that he wasn't speaking from his heart that she had come at him again.

'Really sure? ... Wouldn't you be afraid?'

What a fool he had been to say, with a clever glint in his eye: 'Afraid of what?'

The whole conversation was coming back to him, word for word.

'Can you imagine what our days would be like?'

She hadn't said *nights*, but *days*, as if she meant for them to spend all their time in bed.

'We'd get used to it in the end.'

'Used to what?'

'To us.'

And it was Gisèle who sat next to him in the darkness, watching the same stretch of road, the same trees, the same telegraph poles surge out of the night only to hurtle into nothingness. He was tempted to take her hand and he didn't dare.

He would admit that one day to Dr Bigot, who preferred to visit him in his cell rather than the prison infirmary. Although the guard brought him a chair, he sat on the edge of the bed.

'If I understand correctly, you loved your wife?'

Tony spread his hands wide but simply said, 'Yes.'

'Only, you were unable to reach her ...'

He had never suspected that life could be so complicated. What did the psychiatrist mean, exactly, by 'reach her'? They lived together like any married couple, didn't they?

'Why did you have no more children, after Marianne?'

'I don't know.'

'You didn't want any more?'

On the contrary! He would have wanted six, a dozen, a houseful of children, as in Italy. As for Gisèle, she had talked about two or three boys

and a girl, and they'd taken no precautions against a pregnancy.

'Did you often have sex with your wife?'

'Mainly at the beginning.'

He spoke freely, without trying to hide anything. He had got caught up in this investigation and was as anxious as his interrogators to get to the bottom of it all.

'There was a period while she was pregnant, of course, when ...'

'Was that when you began seeing other women?'

'I would have done that anyway.'

'Is it some need you have?'

'I don't know. All men are like that, aren't they?'

Professor Bigot was around fifty, with a grown son studying in Paris and a daughter recently married to a haematologist, for whom she worked as a lab assistant.

The psychiatrist was untidy, wore loose-fitting, shabby clothes, on which a button often hung by a thread, and he was always blowing his nose as if suffering from a perpetual cold.

How could he make this man understand that drive home in the night? Nothing special had happened. He and Gisèle hadn't said much to each other. At that time he had been certain that she knew nothing – nothing about that afternoon's events, at least, and probably nothing about his affair with Andrée, even if she had heard rumours about a few other escapades.

Yet it was while driving those twelve kilometres that he had felt the closest he ever had to her, the most deeply bound to her. It was on the tip of his tongue: 'I need you, Gisèle.'

Needed her with him. Needed her to believe in him.

'When I think of the years you cost me.'

It was not his wife's voice, but Andrée's, a little hoarse, from deep in her heaving chest, reproaching him for leaving the village when he was sixteen to learn a profession elsewhere.

He had gone to Paris and had worked in a garage until called up for military service. He had never paid any attention to Andrée: she was too tall, she lived in the chateau, and her father was a local hero.

A cold, stuck-up girl. A statue.

‘Why are you laughing?’

For he was driving along laughing, and not very pleasantly.

‘I was remembering the film.’

‘Did you think it was good?’

‘As good as the rest of them.’

A statue that came strangely to life and asked him, with a faraway look in its eye:

‘Tell me, Tony: if I became free?’

Everyone knew that Nicolas was ill and would not make old bones, but that was no reason to talk about him as if he were as good as dead! He had pretended not to have heard her.

‘Would you free yourself too?’

The train whistle had blown a furious blast.

‘What did you say?’

‘I’m asking if, in that case ...’

What would he have replied if he hadn’t recognized Nicolas in the crowd from the station, coming across the square?

The lights were on downstairs in their house. Keeping track of the time, the Molard sisters must have put away their sewing and got ready to go home, for they were usually in bed by nine o’clock or even earlier.

‘I’ll put the van away.’

She got out and walked around to the back of the house to go in the kitchen door, while he went to park the van next to the massive, bright red and yellow machines in the shed.

As he came up to the house, the two sisters were leaving.

‘Goodnight, Tony.’

‘Goodnight.’

Gisèle was taking a last look around to see that everything was in order.

‘Want something to drink? Are you hungry?’

‘No, thanks.’

Later he would ask himself if at that moment she might have been waiting for some sign, some word from him. Was it possible that she had

sensed a threat hanging over them?

After they had been to the cinema, she usually went directly up to check on Marianne's breathing.

'I know it's silly,' she had admitted to him one evening. 'I only do it after I've been away from the house. When I'm here, I feel I'm protecting her. That we're protecting her,' she added quickly. 'When I'm not with her, she seems so helpless to me!'

She would actually lean anxiously over her daughter until she could see her breathing evenly.

He could think of nothing to say. They undressed facing one another, as they always did.

Gisèle's hips had broadened after childbearing, but she was still thin, otherwise, and her pale breasts sagged a little.

How could he make others understand that he loved her, when that evening, longing to pour out his feelings to her, he hadn't been able to make her understand that?

'Goodnight, Tony.'

'Goodnight, Gisèle.'

She was the one who turned out the bedside lamp, on her side, because she was always the first one up, and in the winter it was still dark.

Wasn't she hesitating a moment, before turning it off? He held his breath. Click ...



3.

He wasn't the nervous type. They had put him through enough tests in Poitiers to find that out: first the prison doctor had examined him, then the psychiatrist, and that strange woman, a psychologist with eyes like a gypsy, who seemed comical at times but frightening at others.

People tended instead to be amazed and even shocked at how calm he was, and someone in the courtroom – the assistant public prosecutor or the counsel for the plaintiff – would later describe his composure as cynical, even aggressive.

It was true that he was usually in control of himself, more inclined to a wait-and-see attitude, preferring to remain on his guard instead of being more outgoing, more enterprising.

Hadn't it been a happy time, those two weeks at Les Sables-d'Olonne? Happy and a bit sad, with sudden rushes of anxiety he couldn't always hide from his wife and daughter.

They were living like most summer holiday-makers, having breakfast on the terrace, with Marianne already in her red bathing suit, and by nine all three of them were at the beach, where they had quickly claimed their own private spot.

In two days they had established their habits and rituals, meeting their neighbours in the dining room of Les Roches Noires, smiling at the elderly couple at the table opposite theirs, who would wave affectionately at

Marianne. As for Marianne, she was fascinated by the old gentleman's beard.

'If he leans any lower, his beard will land in his soup.'

She spied on him every evening, waiting for the inevitable.

Every morning and afternoon the same people would settle in under beach umbrellas all around them: the blonde lady who spent so much time putting on sun-tan oil before lying on her stomach, reading all day with her shoulder straps down, and the bad-mannered kids from Paris, who stuck their tongues out at Marianne and pushed her, out in the water ...

Gisèle, unused to being at leisure, was knitting a sky-blue pullover for their daughter to wear on her first day at school, her lips moving as she counted stitches.

Was this holiday at the beach really turning out to be such a good idea? He played with Marianne, teaching her to swim, waist-deep in the water with his hand under her chin. He had tried to teach his wife, too, but as soon as she lost her footing she would panic, flailing around and clutching at him. Once a wave had suddenly knocked her over and she had shot him a look of – was it fear? Not fear of the sea. Fear of him.

For hours, he stayed calm, relaxed, playing ball, walking with Marianne to the end of the pier. They would all stroll together along the narrow streets of the town, visiting the cathedral, taking photos of the fishing boats at the docks, the local fishwives at the market in their pleated skirts and varnished wooden shoes.

There were perhaps ten thousand tourists all doing the same things, and whenever a storm broke, they would snatch up their belongings to rush off to the hotels and cafés.

Why, at times, did he seem to absent himself? Was he regretting having left Saint-Justin, where Andrée might be trying in vain to signal him?

'Now about this signal, Monsieur Falcone ...'

After a few weeks in Poitiers, he was losing track of which questions had been Diem's and which the psychiatrist's. Sometimes they asked the same thing, with different words, in a different context. Weren't they getting

together to compare statements between interrogations, hoping he would contradict himself in the end?

‘When did you and your mistress establish this signal?’

‘That first evening.’

‘You mean in September, by the side of the road?’

‘Yes.’

‘Whose idea was it?’

‘Hers. I already told you. She wanted us to meet again somewhere else and thought right away of my brother’s hotel.’

‘And the towel?’

‘Her first suggestion was to put a specific item in a corner of a shop window.’

There were two front windows displaying a jumble of groceries, cotton cloths, aprons, rubber boots. The Despierre store was on the main street, a few steps from the church, and everyone going through town had to pass it.

It was dark inside, with barrels and crates piled against the walls, both counters stacked high with merchandise, shelves brimming with bottles and cans, drill trousers, wicker baskets and hams hanging from the ceilings.

The smell of this shop was the strongest, most evocative scent of his entire childhood, with that high note from the cans of kerosene, for the isolated farms and hamlets did not yet have electricity.

‘What item?’

‘She’d thought of a packet of starch. Then she was afraid that her husband might move it without her noticing while she was off in the kitchen.’

How could they hope to learn in a few hours a day, over weeks or even months, everything they needed to know about a life so different from theirs? Not only his life, and Gisèle’s, but the lives of Andrée, Madame Despierre, Madame Formier, the life of the village, the back-and-forth between Triant and Saint-Justin. Simply to understand the blue room, they would have had to ...

‘In the end she decided that on the Thursdays when she could join me in the hotel she would set a towel out to dry on her window-sill.’

Their bedroom window, hers and Nicolas'! For they did sleep in the same room. It was over the shop, one of the three narrow windows with safety bars, the one in which a lithograph in a black-and-gold frame could be glimpsed in the dim light, hanging on the muddy-brown wall.

'So that every Thursday morning ...'

'I passed her house.'

Who knows whether, while he was living in a bathing suit on the beach, perhaps Andrée was signalling him for help, and the towel was permanently draped on the safety bar ... True, he had seen her and Nicolas driving home from Triant in the Citroën, but he knew nothing about their state of mind.

'I wonder, Monsieur Falcone, whether, in suggesting that holiday to your wife ...'

'She had just mentioned Marianne's poor colour.'

'I'm aware of that. You did seize the opportunity: a chance, perhaps, to reassure her, to play the good husband, the loving father, to allay her suspicions. What do you think of that explanation?'

'It isn't true.'

'You continue to claim that your intention was to get away from your mistress?'

He hated that word, yet he had to put up with it.

'That's about it.'

'You'd already decided not to see her again?'

'I hadn't any definite plan.'

'Have you seen her again during the intervening months?'

'No.'

'She never signalled to you again?'

'I have no idea, because from then on I avoided going by her house on Thursday mornings.'

'And you did so simply because one afternoon you saw her husband walk from the station to the hotel terrace to sit there drinking lemonade? She is the only woman, by your own admission, with whom you have experienced the fulfilment of physical love. You described it, as I recall, as a revelation ...'

That was true, even if he hadn't used that particular word. At Les Sables-d'Olonne, sometimes he found himself thinking about the blue room against his will, gritting his teeth with desire. At other times he could be unreasonable, impatient, scolding Marianne for a trifle or withdrawing into himself, with a hard look in his eye. Gisèle and her daughter would look at each other, the mother seeming to tell her child, 'Pay no attention, your father has things on his mind.'

A moment later, were they not just as uneasy when he abruptly became exaggeratedly patient, gentle and affectionate?

'Are you ambitious, Monsieur Falcone?'

He had to think about that, since he never had before. Are there really people who spend their lives looking at themselves in a mirror and asking themselves questions – about themselves?

'Depends on what you mean by that. At twelve I worked after school and during the holidays to buy myself a bicycle. Later I dreamed about having a motorbike. I went to Paris. When I married Gisèle, I started thinking about having my own business. In Poitiers, the firm I worked for assembled agricultural machinery shipped in pieces from America, and I was earning a good living.'

'Your brother set up on his own, too, after trying out several trades.'

What connection could there be between their two careers?

It wasn't Diem, but Professor Bigot speaking, slowly, as if musing aloud.

'I wonder if the fact that your parents were Italian, so that you were both foreigners in a French village ... I've been told your father was a bricklayer?'

The magistrate had spent an entire afternoon questioning the elder Falcone, seeking him out in his cottage in La Boisselle.

'What do you know about your father?'

'He came from Larina, a very poor village in the Piedmont region, about thirty kilometres from Vercelli. Out there, where the mountains can't support everyone, most boys emigrate, and my father did the same, when he was fourteen or fifteen. He came to France with a crew that dug a tunnel, I

don't know which one, somewhere near Limoges; then he travelled around, worked on other tunnels ...'

It was difficult to talk about Angelo Falcone, whom everyone in Saint-Justin called old Angelo, for he was different, somehow, from other men.

'He travelled a lot in France – north, south, east, west – and finally settled down in La Boisselle.'

Even now, Tony remembered it as an astonishing place. Two or three kilometres from Saint-Justin, La Boisselle had been a monastery built on the site of an ancient fortress and constructed from its very stones. One could still see sections of the old walls among the rampant weeds and remnants of the moat, filled with stagnant water, where he had fished for frogs.

The monks had probably practised agriculture, for around the large courtyard there remained buildings of all kinds, stables, workshops and winepress sheds.

The Coutant family occupied most of the area, with about a dozen cows, some sheep, two draught horses and an old billy goat that chewed tobacco. They rented out whatever buildings they didn't need, if they were still habitable, and these formed a motley little colony comprising, aside from the Falcones, a Czech family and some people from Alsace with their eight children.

'Your father wasn't that young any more when you were born.'

'He was forty-three, forty-four when he returned to his Piedmontese village and brought my mother back with him.'

'In other words, he decided it was time for him to marry and he went home to find a wife?'

'I believe that's what happened.'

His mother's maiden name had been Maria Passaris, and when she arrived in France she was twenty-two years old.

'Were they a happy couple?'

'I never heard them argue.'

'Did your father keep working as a bricklayer?'

'That was all he knew, and it never occurred to him to do anything else.'

‘You were born first, and your brother Vincent came along three years later.’

‘Then my sister Angelina.’

‘Does she live in Saint-Justin?’

‘She died.’

‘At an early age?’

‘At six months. My mother had gone to Triant, I don’t know why. Before she came to France, she had never left her village. Here, in a country where she didn’t speak the language, she rarely left the house. That day, in Triant, it’s thought that she opened the wrong door by mistake and got out of the train on the wrong side. She and the baby in her arms were run down by an express.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Seven. My brother was four.’

‘Was it your father who raised you?’

‘Yes. When he got home from his job, he did the cooking and housework. I didn’t know him well enough from before to know if the accident changed him.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know perfectly well. Didn’t you speak with him?’

There was an edge in Tony’s voice now.

‘Yes ...’

‘And what do you think? Are the people around here right? Is my father simple?’

In Saint-Justin, no one said ‘simple-minded’: just ‘simple’ was enough. Embarrassed, Bigot merely gestured vaguely in reply.

‘I don’t know if you got anything out of him. For years, we never heard him speak, my brother and I, unless it was absolutely necessary. At seventy-eight, he lives alone in the house where we were born and still does a little bricklaying here and there.

‘He refuses to come live with me or Vincent. His only distraction is building a miniature village in his tiny garden. He began working on it

twenty years ago. The church is less than a metre high, but it's complete to the last detail.

'You can see the inn, the town hall, a bridge over a stream, a water mill, and every year he adds a house or two. Seems it's a faithful reproduction of Larina, that village he and my mother came from.'

He did not say what he really thought. His father was an uncouth man of limited intelligence who had been content to live alone until he was past forty. Tony could see pretty well why he had gone back to Larina to seek a wife.

In his way, Angelo Falcone had loved Maria Passaris, who was young enough to be his daughter. Not with words, or grand shows of affection, because he was a man who kept things to himself.

When she had died along with his daughter, Angelo Falcone had withdrawn into himself for good and had soon begun building his strange toy village in the garden.

'He isn't crazy!' exclaimed Tony fiercely.

He could guess what some people must think, including, perhaps, this Professor Bigot.

'And I'm not crazy either!'

'There has never been any question of that.'

'Then why are you still grilling me for the sixth or seventh time? Because the newspapers are calling me a monster?'

But this still lay in the future ...

At Les Roches Noires people lived on the beach, with the taste of sand in their mouths and sand in their beds and pockets.

It rained only twice in two weeks. The sun dazzled everyone's eyes and skin to the point of vertigo, especially if they stared a long time at the white-crested waves rolling slowly in from the open sea, one after another, until they crashed into a spray of a myriad sparkling drops.

Marianne got a touch of sunburn. After a few days, Tony was brown enough that when he undressed at night, his pale skin showed the shape of his bathing suit. Only Gisèle, who stayed under the beach umbrella, still looked the same as always.

What was happening in Saint-Justin, in the Despierres' gloomy shop? And in the evening, in the bedroom where Andrée and Nicolas undressed in front of each other?

The pink-edged towel: wasn't it draped over the guard rail as a signal of alarm? And Nicolas' stony-faced mother: had she not crossed the garden to take the situation in hand – and take revenge, at last, on her daughter-in-law?

They thought, all these people in Poitiers, policemen, magistrates, doctors, even that unnerving lady psychologist, that they were going to establish the truth, when they knew almost nothing about the Despierres, the Formiers and so many others who were important in their own ways.

And Tony: what did they know about him? Less than he did, right?

Madame Despierre was certainly the most important and imposing personage in Saint-Justin, eclipsing even the mayor, a wealthy cattle merchant in his own right. In a village where men and women of the same generation had all gone to the same school together, few dared call her Germaine, much less address her familiarly. To everyone, she was Madame Despierre.

Tony must have been mistaken, for she was barely thirty when he had begun purchasing things for his parents at the grocery store, but he remembered her hair being just as grey then as it was now. Behind her counter, she wore a grey smock, leaving her chalk-white face as the only pale spot.

He had known her husband, a puny man with a hesitant manner and a timorous expression, wearing a pince-nez and a smock that was too long for him.

Sometimes he would start swaying, and his wife would hustle him into the room behind the store, closing the door on the customers glancing knowingly at one another and shaking their heads.

Tony had been hearing talk about the falling sickness well before he understood that Despierre suffered from epilepsy and that, behind the

closed door, he was thrashing convulsively, lying on the floor with his jaws clenched and drool streaking his chin.

He could recall the man's funeral and following his procession with all the other schoolchildren in little rows, save for Nicolas, who was with his mother at the front of the mourners.

They were said to be very rich and very stingy. Not only did they own several houses in town, but two large farms as well, worked by tenant farmers, plus the hamlet of La Guipotte.

'Monsieur Falcone: why did you choose to settle in Saint-Justin, which you had left more than ten years earlier?'

Hadn't he already answered that question? They repeated the same things to him so often that he just didn't know any more. He must be contradicting himself at times, for he himself did not have the answers to these 'whys' and 'hows'.

'Maybe it was because of my father.'

'You hardly saw him.'

About once a week. Old Angelo had come to his house two or three times but had seemed ill at ease. Gisèle was a stranger to him, and he was uncomfortable around her. Tony preferred to go to La Boissière every Saturday evening.

The door would stay open. They did not light the lamp. They listened to the frogs croaking in the marsh, and the two men, sitting on straw-bottomed chairs, let the time pass without a word.

'Don't forget that my brother was already established in Triant.'

'You're sure you didn't come back for Andrée?'

'That again!'

'You were aware of her marriage to your former classmate Nicolas?'

No! That had come as a surprise. There was a vast gulf between the Despierres and the Formiers, and the two mothers, although close in age, came from different worlds.

While Madame Despierre was the very model of a nouveau riche peasant, the wife of Dr Formier was typical of a certain provincial bourgeoisie fallen on hard times and refusing to lose face.

Her father had been a notary at Villiers-le-Haut, and the Bardave family men, from father to son, had been socializing with the local gentry for so long, hunting and playing bridge with them, that they'd come to think of themselves as gentry too.

Andrée's grandfather had bequeathed nothing to his children, and neither had her father. Dr Formier had left his wife and daughter an annuity so modest that, although they still lived in the chateau and dressed like townspeople, they did not always have enough to eat.

Which of them, Madame Despierre or Madame Formier, had proposed this marriage to the other one? Was it the proud, spiteful widow with her grocery store? Or the bourgeoisie anxious to see her daughter safe from want, knowing that she would be rich one day – and probably before long, at that?

‘At school, Nicolas seems to have been bullied by his classmates ...’

True and false, like all the rest of it. Sickly, often plagued by stomach aches, unable to join his classmates' games, Nicolas had been fated to become a laughing stock for the other boys. They called him a sissy, a fraidy-cat, accused him of clinging to his mother's skirts. Even worse, unable to defend himself, he reported to the principal all the tricks the kids played on him.

Tony hadn't belonged to the gang that harassed him. He wasn't any better than they were, perhaps, but as a foreigner he was a bit of an outsider himself. Once during their break time, and once more, when school was letting out, he had come to the defence of Nicolas, whom he did not yet know was ill.

The boy had had his first fit at the age of twelve and a half, out of nowhere, in the middle of a class. There had been the sound of a body falling to the floor, and as his classmates began turning around, the teacher had slapped his desk with a ruler.

‘Nobody move!’

It was spring. The chestnut trees in the playground were in flower. There had been swarms of maybugs that year, and all eyes had been on them as they flew clumsily around the classroom, bumping into windows and walls.

In spite of the teacher's order, the children stared at Nicolas, their faces blanching, and some were so frightened they began to feel sick.

‘Everybody go to the playground!’

There had been a general stampede outside, but the bravest kids soon crept up to the windows to watch the teacher force his handkerchief into Nicolas' mouth.

One of them had raced to the grocery store, and it wasn't long before Madame Despierre arrived in her eternal grey smock.

The children outside pestered those at the window.

‘What's going on?’

‘Nothing. They're leaving him on the floor. He must be dying.’

There were a lot of guilty consciences that day.

‘You think he ate something bad for him?’

‘No. Seems his father had the same fits.’

‘Are they catching?’

Fifteen or thirty minutes later – they had lost track of time – Madame Despierre left through the playground, holding the hand of her son, who looked bewildered but otherwise the same as usual.

He had never had another fit at school. As far as Tony knew, he could almost always sense one coming, sometimes several days in advance, and his mother would keep him home.

No one ever spoke of this in front of Madame Despierre, and certainly not in her store. Without knowing why, everyone considered the malady something to be ashamed of. Nicolas had not gone to upper school in Triant, nor had he done any military service or even gone to any dances. He had never had a bicycle or a motorbike and he did not drive the Citroën.

Sometimes he wouldn't speak for a week. Sullen, suspicious, he would look at people as if they wished him harm. He drank neither liquor nor wine, and his stomach could tolerate only bland food.

Hadn't Tony been disturbed by the thought of him that September evening, there with Andrée half-naked by the roadside?

‘Weren't you more or less aware of resenting him, because he was rich?’

He shrugged. Naturally, before he had learned that Nicolas was ill, before that first fit in school, he had envied him in a childish way: he had dreamed of jars of rainbow-coloured sweets and the biscuits in the glass-topped tins that Nicolas, he imagined, could simply raid at will, whereas *he* could afford just the cheapest sweets, and only now and then.

‘When you learned of his marriage, didn’t you think that he had in some way bought Andrée, or that his mother had bought her for him?’

Perhaps. He had felt a little contemptuous of ‘the statue’, because he refused to believe that she had married for love.

After thinking about it, he had felt sorry for her. As a child, he had sometimes gone hungry, too, but he hadn’t lived in the chateau or felt obliged to keep up a front.

He had no idea how the marriage had been arranged. From what he knew of the two mothers, each must have imposed her own conditions. They lived almost across from each other: the chateau was to the right of the church, near the presbytery; across the square, on the corner of Rue Neuve, the Despierre grocery store was backed by the town hall and the school.

Although people still talked about the elaborate white wedding and the banquet at the inn, the newlyweds had not gone on a honeymoon but spent that night, and every night thereafter, in the bedroom over the shop.

As for Madame Despierre, she had moved into a small cottage next to the garden, about twenty metres from the couple’s home.

At first the two women worked behind the counter, and the mother continued to do the cooking. An elderly local woman, wearing men’s shoes, came every day to clean.

The whole town was watching Madame Despierre and Andrée, and soon it was obvious that they spoke to each other only about business matters.

Later, the mother began eating her meals in the cottage. Finally, after a few months, she ceased to appear in the store or the house, and her son began going through the garden two or three times a day to see her.

Did this mean that Andrée had won the battle? Had she resolved, when she got married, to gradually supplant her mother-in-law?

Tony had been with Andrée in the blue room eight times, and he had never thought of asking her about it, preferring not to know, not to think too much about this other life of the naked and wanton woman he knew so well.

He vaguely sensed a vital truth he could not manage to express. It informed, he felt, what was said on 2 August, that fatal August day he had experienced so simply, never suspecting how much would later be made of it, including fodder for front-page news.

A reporter from a major Parisian paper would even launch a phrase adopted by all his colleagues: ‘The Frenzied Lovers’.

‘Would you like to spend your whole life with me?’

‘Sure.’

He had said that, he did not deny it. He was the one who had reported that conversation to the magistrate. But the important thing was his tone of voice. He was just talking, without meaning anything by it. It wasn’t real. In the blue room, nothing was real. Or rather, its reality was of a different nature, incomprehensible anywhere else.

He had tried to explain this to the psychiatrist, and at the time Bigot had seemed to understand, but a bit later, through some question or remark, he had shown that he hadn’t understood at all.

If Tony had been thinking about living with her, he wouldn’t have said, ‘Sure!’

He hadn’t the slightest idea what he would have replied, but he would have found other words. Andrée had rightly sensed that, for she had pressed him on it.

‘Really sure? ... Wouldn’t you be afraid?’

‘Afraid of what?’

‘Can you imagine what our days would be like?’

‘*We’d get used to it in the end!*’

‘Used to what?’

Was that real life? Would he have spoken like that to Gisèle? Andrée, sprawled sated on the bed, was playing the game, along with him.

‘*To us.*’

Precisely. They were ‘us’ only in a bed, in the blue room they strove in a kind of frenzy – to use that journalist’s word – to impregnate with their odour.

They had never been a couple elsewhere, except when they made love the first time, in the tall grass and nettles beside Bois de Sarelle.

‘If you didn’t love her, how do you explain ...’

What did they mean by love? Could Professor Bigot – who prided himself on his scientific credentials – have defined that word for him? His daughter had just got married: how did she love her husband?

And the little magistrate, Monsieur Diem, with his halo of unruly hair ... His wife had recently given him his first child, and, like all young fathers, he must have had, like Tony, to get up at night to bottle-feed the baby. What kind of love did he feel for his wife?

To answer their questions, Tony would have had to tell them things that don’t bear talking about, moments like those he had experienced at Les Sables-d’Olonne.

‘Why choose Les Sables over some beach in Brittany or the Vendée?’

‘Because that’s where we went during the first year of our marriage.’

‘So your wife may have thought that it was a pilgrimage, that this spot had some sentimental value for you? Isn’t that exactly what you would have done if you were trying to allay her suspicions?’

All he could do was bite his tongue and boil with anger inside. It was useless to fight back.

Could he tell them about the last day at the shore? First, that morning ... Lying under the beach umbrella, sometimes he would glance through half-closed eyelids at his wife, sitting in a striped deck chair, hurrying to finish the sky-blue pullover.

‘What are you thinking about?’ she had asked him.

‘You.’

‘And just what are you thinking?’

‘That I was lucky to meet you.’

It wasn’t the whole truth. Behind him, he could hear Marianne pretending to read the text of a picture book, and he had been reflecting that, in twelve

or fifteen years, she would be in love, she would get married, she would leave them to share the life of a man.

Of a stranger, in effect, because it takes more than a few months, or two or three years, for a married couple to really know each other.

That's how he had arrived at Gisèle: he was watching her knit, relaxed, focused.

Just when she had asked her question, he had been wondering what *she* was thinking.

To tell the truth, he did not know what she thought of him, how she saw him, how she judged his actions.

They had been married for seven years. So he had then tried to imagine their life to come. They would gradually grow old. Marianne would become a young lady. They would attend her wedding. One day, she would tell them that she was expecting, and when the baby arrived they would take second place behind the father.

Wouldn't that be the moment when he and Gisèle would truly love each other? Don't couples take long years to learn how to know each other, sharing many memories, ones like those of this very morning they were living now?

They must have been thinking along the same lines because shortly afterwards, his wife murmured, 'It feels strange to think that Marianne is already heading off to school ...'

And he was all the way up to her wedding!

Their daughter sensed that she could get away with anything at the beach and was taking complete advantage of her father – that afternoon more than ever. She never left him alone for a minute. The tide was out, the distant sea beyond reach: for more than an hour, he had to help Marianne build an enormous fortress in the sand, or, rather, he had to follow her orders. And, like old Angelo in his garden, she kept demanding one more thing: a moat, a ditch, a drawbridge.

'Now let's go and find shells to pave the courtyard and the paths outside.'

'Watch out for the sun. Put on your hat!'

They'd bought her a Venetian gondolier's hat in a seaside shop.

Gisèle didn't dare add, 'Don't wear your father out!'

Each carrying a red pail, they had traipsed the entire length of the beach, father and daughter, heads down, eyes peeled for the gleam of a shell in the brown sand, sometimes tripping over the leg of a stretched-out sunbather or nimbly avoiding a beach ball.

Did he feel he was fulfilling a duty, earning forgiveness for some failing, atoning for a fault committed? In all honesty, he would not have known. What he did know was that this walk in the sunshine, accompanied by the fluting voice of his daughter, was both melancholy and sweet.

He was happy, and sad. Not because of Andrée, or of Nicolas. He didn't remember giving them a thought. He would freely have said: happy and sad like life itself.

When they turned around, to the sound of the music from the nearby casino, the way back looked long, and their goal distant, especially to Marianne, who began dragging her feet.

'Tired?'

'A little.'

'You want me to carry you on my shoulders?'

She had laughed, revealing the gap in her teeth.

'I'm too big!'

When she had been two or three, that had been her favourite game. He had always carried her up to bed at night that way.

'People will laugh at you,' she added, sorely tempted.

He had hoisted her up and, since she was holding on to his head, he carried both the pails.

'I'm not too heavy?'

'No.'

'Is it true I'm skinny?'

'Who says so?'

'Roland.'

He was the blacksmith's son.

'He's a year younger than me and he weighs twenty-five kilos. Me, I only weigh nineteen. I got weighed before we left, on the scale at the grocery

store.'

'Boys are heavier than girls.'

'Why?'

Pensively, Gisèle watched them approach, perhaps with a pang in her heart. He set his daughter down on the sand.

'Help me add the shells.'

'Don't you think you're overdoing it, Marianne? Your father is here to rest. He has to go back to work the day after tomorrow.'

'He's the one who wanted to carry me!'

Their eyes had met.

'It's the last day of holiday for her, too,' he had said lightly in her defence.

Gisèle had said nothing further, but he thought he had glimpsed a grateful look in her eye.

Grateful for what? For having devoted himself, for two weeks, to both of them?

It seemed only natural to him ...



4.

Sometimes he had to wait in the corridor outside the magistrate's door, sitting handcuffed on a bench between two gendarmes, different ones almost every time.

He no longer felt humiliated, had stopped raging inside. He watched people pass by, prisoners and witnesses going to wait in front of other doors, robed lawyers flapping their big sleeves like wings, and he didn't flinch when anyone glanced at him curiously or turned around to stare.

Once inside the magistrate's chambers, after removing his handcuffs, the guards would leave at a sign from Diem, who would apologize for being late or having been detained then automatically hold out his silver cigarette case. It had become a ritual.

The chambers were old-fashioned, not all that clean, as in train stations and administrative buildings: greenish walls, a black marble mantelpiece topped with a clock – also black – that had probably been showing 11.55 for years now.

Sometimes the magistrate started by saying, 'I don't think I'll be needing you, Monsieur Trinquet.'

The clerk with the brown moustache would leave, carrying some work he would go God knows where to do, which meant that they would not really be talking about the facts of the matter.

‘I suppose you have understood why I ask you questions that don’t seem to have any bearing on the case. I am trying to establish, in a way, a certain foundation, a personal file on you.’

They could hear the noises of the town, see the open windows across the street and people in their homes going about their daily business. The magistrate allowed Tony to stand up whenever he needed to stretch his legs, walk up and down, go and spend a moment watching the bustling street.

‘I would like you to describe, for example, the course of your day at work.’

‘Well, that depends on what day of the week it is, and in which season. Most of all, it varies with the fairs and market days.’

Realizing that he had spoken in the present tense, Tony caught himself with a wan smile.

‘At least it used to ... I’d follow the fairs within a radius of about thirty kilometres, the ones at Virieux, Ambasse, Chiron. Do you want the entire list?’

‘That isn’t necessary.’

‘On those days, I’d leave early, sometimes at five in the morning.’

‘Did your wife get up to fix you breakfast?’

‘She insisted on it. On other days, I’d have appointments out at various farms, to demonstrate some machinery or carry out repairs. Sometimes customers would come to me, and we’d be out in the shed.’

‘Let’s take an average day.’

‘Gisèle would get up first, at six.’

She would slip quietly out of bed, taking along her salmon-pink dressing gown, and he would soon hear her lighting the fire in the kitchen range, just below him. Then she would go out to the garden to throw cracked corn to the hens and feed the rabbits.

Towards 6.30 he would simply run a comb through his thick hair and go downstairs without washing or shaving. The table was set in the kitchen, without a cloth, because it had a Formica top. They would eat together while Marianne slept on, as late as she liked.

‘Until she started school. Then we had to wake her up at seven.’

‘Did you drive her there?’

‘Only for the first few days.’

‘You did so yourself?’

‘My wife drove her, and then did her shopping. Otherwise, she would go to the village towards nine, going to the butcher’s shop or the grocery store ...’

‘The Despierres’ store?’

‘It’s more or less the only grocery in Saint-Justin.’

During the mornings in particular, a half-dozen women were always gathered in the shop, chatting under the low ceiling while awaiting their turns. One day, he had compared the place to a church sacristy, he no longer remembered why.

‘Did your wife ever send you on errands?’

‘Only when I went to Triant or some other town, for things we couldn’t find in the village.’

He realized that these questions were not as innocent as they seemed, but he still answered them frankly, trying to be precise.

‘Did you ever go inside the Despierre grocery store?’

‘Once every two months, maybe ... When my wife was doing a thorough housecleaning, say, or if she had the flu ...’

‘On what day did she clean the house?’

‘Saturday.’

That was typical. Monday was wash day, while Tuesday or Wednesday, depending on the weather and if the laundry was dry or not, would be spent ironing. It was the same in most of the village houses, and on some mornings the yards and gardens were completely decked out in laundry pinned to clotheslines.

‘What time did your mail arrive?’

‘It wasn’t delivered to the house. The train goes through Saint-Justin at 8.07 in the morning, and the bags are taken straight to the post office. Our place is at the far end of the village, so we’re at the end of the postman’s round – he’d only get to us around noon. I preferred to go to the post office,

where I often had to wait for them to finish sorting. Otherwise, they held my letters for me.'

'We'll come back to that. Did you walk there?'

'Usually. I only took the van if I had something to do outside the village.'

'Say, every other day? A few times a week?'

'More like every other day, except in the middle of winter, because I didn't drive around as much then.'

He would have had to explain his profession in detail, the rhythm of the seasons, the crops. For example, when they had returned from the seaside the fairs were at their height. Then the grape harvests had followed, and fields were ploughed in the autumn in readiness for spring, so that he was overwhelmed with work.

That first Thursday, he had avoided taking Rue Neuve to see if Andrée had put the towel in the window. He had already said that to Diem, who had gone over it anyway.

'You'd decided not to see her again?'

'“Decided” isn't the right word ...'

'Wasn't that because you'd heard from her through some other channel?'

This time, he had made a mistake and he had realized it the moment he opened his mouth. Too late: the words, already prepared, were leaving his lips.

'I received no news from her.'

He wasn't lying for himself. And he wasn't aware of lying for Andrée, either. It was from some sort of fidelity, or male honesty.

On the day of that interview, Tony remembered, it had been raining, and Monsieur Trinquet, the clerk, was at his end of the table.

'You came home from Les Sables with your wife and daughter on 17 August. The first Thursday, contrary to your usual routine, you did not go to Triant. Were you afraid of encountering Andrée Despierre?'

'Perhaps. But I would not use the word “afraid”.'

'Let's continue. On the following Thursday you had an appointment at ten that morning with a certain Félicien Hurlot, the secretary of a farming cooperative. You met him at your brother's hotel. You had lunch there with

your client and you drove home to Saint-Justin without showing yourself on Place du Marché. Still to avoid any possibility of finding yourself face to face with your mistress?’

He found it impossible to reply. He truly did not know. For weeks he had been in a fog, confused, not asking himself any questions and, above all, not making any decisions.

What he could honestly say was that he felt a new distance between himself and Andrée, and that he stayed more at home, as if he needed to be close to his family.

‘On 4 September ...’

While the magistrate was talking, Tony tried to remember what that date could mean.

‘On 4 September, you received the first letter.’

He had turned red.

‘I don’t know what letter you mean.’

‘Your name and your address, on the envelope, were written in block letters. It was postmarked Triant.’

‘I don’t remember.’

He kept on lying, since it seemed too late to change his story now.

‘The postmaster, Monsieur Bouvier, made a comment to you about that letter.’

Diem pulled a page from his file and read it aloud.

“I told him: Tony, it looks to me just like an anonymous letter. People who send anonymous letters write like that.”

‘That still doesn’t refresh your memory?’

He shook his head, ashamed of lying, because he lied badly, flushing red, staring into space so that no one could see the misery in his eyes.

Although it bore no signature, the letter was still revealing in its own way. The text, quite short, was also written in block letters.

Everything is fine. Don’t be afraid.

‘You see, Monsieur Falcone, I am convinced that the person who wrote to you and went to mail this letter from Triant was disguising the writing for

fear of being identified not by you, but by the postmaster. That would suggest someone from Saint-Justin, whose normal handwriting is familiar to Monsieur Bouvier. The following week, there was a second envelope, just like the first, addressed to you.

‘Making light of it, the postmaster said to you, “Well, well! I may have been mistaken. There may be some love story behind all this.”’

The text was no longer than the first message.

I haven’t forgotten. I love you.

He had been so shaken that he hadn’t dared go anywhere near Rue Neuve and had detoured around it to go to the station, where he often received machine parts sent on the high-speed train.

He had spent several anxious weeks going off to the markets and farms or working in overalls at home in the shed.

More often than in the past, he would cross the field to the house to find Gisèle busy peeling vegetables, washing the tile floor in the kitchen or tidying the bedrooms upstairs. With Marianne in school, the house seemed emptier. When she came home at four, he felt impelled to come and see them in the kitchen, sitting across from each other having their afternoon snack, each with her own pot of jam.

Later they would go over that again as well, and more than once. Marianne liked only strawberry jam, whereas strawberries, even when cooked, gave her mother a rash, so she preferred plum jam.

At the beginning of their marriage, Gisèle’s tastes in food had amused him, and he had teased her about them.

Because of her blonde hair, pale skin and oval face, people often said there was something angelic about her.

Actually, she liked only strong flavours: pickled herring, salads with lots of garlic and vinegar, and strong cheeses. It wasn’t unusual, when she was working in the kitchen garden, to see her munching on a big raw onion. Yet she didn’t touch sweets and never ate dessert. He was the one fond of pastry.

There were other peculiarities about their married life. His parents, as good Italians, had raised their sons in the Roman Catholic religion, and his childhood memories were filled with the sounds of church organs, with women and girls coming out of mass on Sunday mornings in silk dresses, wearing the rice powder and perfume they used only on that day.

He knew every house, every stone in the village and could still recall, coming home from school one day, having retied a shoelace with his foot on a particular milestone, but it was the church that loomed the largest, with its three stained-glass windows behind the chancel and its burning tapers. The other windows were of clear glass. The chancel windows bore the names of their donors, and one on the right, the name of Nicolas' grandfather or great-grandfather: Despierre.

He still went to Sunday mass with Marianne; Gisèle stayed at home. She had never been baptized. Her father was a professed atheist and in his entire life had read only a few books, four or five novels by Zola.

'I'm an ordinary working man, Tony, but I'm telling you, that *Germinal* ...'

In other families it was the reverse: the men would escort their women to the church door before heading to the nearest café to bend their elbows until the end of the service.

'Would you insist on claiming, Monsieur Falcone, that during that particular October you were not expecting something to happen?'

Nothing specific. It was more like the uneasiness one feels before an illness. They'd had an unusually rainy October. Tony had worn his winter outfit from dawn to dusk: jodhpurs, high laced boots, brown sheepskin jacket.

Marianne found school exciting and chattered about it at every meal.

'You no longer recall anything about the third letter, either? Monsieur Bouvier has a better memory than you do. He says you received it on a Friday, like the others, either before or after the 20th of October.'

It had been the briefest, the most disturbing.

Soon! I love you.

‘I suppose you burned these notes and those that followed?’

No. He had torn them into little pieces that he then threw into the Orneau. Swollen by the rains, the brownish water swept along tree branches, dead animals and all sorts of debris.

‘My experience tells me that you will soon change your tune. You seem to have answered with complete candour on every other point. I would be astonished if your lawyer did not advise you to take the same attitude with regard to these letters, which would allow you to tell me about your state of mind late in October.’

It was impossible. His state of mind changed every hour. He tried not to think, and felt Gisèle watching him with curiosity – perhaps even worry. She no longer asked him, ‘What are you thinking?’ but would remark, as if tired, ‘You’re not hungry?’

He had no appetite. Three times, at dawn, he had gone to pick mushrooms in the meadow between them and the blacksmith’s, at the highest spot, near the big cherry tree. He had sold several tractors, including two to the agricultural cooperative at Virieux, which leased them to small farmers, and they had also ordered a reaper-binder for the coming summer, for the same purpose.

It had been a good year, and he would be able to pay off a significant part of what he owed on the house.

‘We’ve arrived at 31 October. What did you do that day?’

‘I went to see a customer in Vermoise, thirty-two kilometres away, and I worked for part of the day on his broken-down tractor. I was having trouble finding where the problem was and had lunch at the farm.’

‘Did you return via Triant? And stop to see your brother?’

‘It was on my way, and I usually chat with him and Lucia for a moment.’

‘You never spoke to them of your apprehensions? Or a possible – perhaps probable – change in your circumstances?’

‘What change?’

‘We’ll come back to that. You went home and had dinner. After which you watched television, one you’d bought two weeks earlier. That is what

you told the police inspector from Poitiers, whose report I have in front of me. You went upstairs to bed at the same time as your wife?’

‘Of course.’

‘You were unaware of what was happening that night, less than half a kilometre away?’

‘How could I have known?’

‘You’re forgetting the letters, Falcone. You’re saying they don’t exist, true, but I am taking them into account. The next day, All Saints, you went off to church at around ten o’clock, holding your daughter’s hand.’

‘That’s correct.’

‘So you went past the grocery store.’

‘The shutters were closed, as they are on Sundays and holidays.’

‘The upstairs ones as well?’

‘I did not look up.’

‘Does your indifference mean that you considered your relationship with Andrée Despierre at an end?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Or, if you did you not look up, wasn’t it because you already knew?’

‘I didn’t know.’

‘Several people were standing on the pavement in front of the shop.’

‘People gather every Sunday on the square before and after high mass.’

‘When did you learn that Nicolas had died?’

‘At the beginning of the sermon. As soon as he reached the pulpit, Abbé Louvette invited the faithful to pray with him for the soul of Nicolas Despierre, who had died during the night at the age of thirty-three.’

‘What was your reaction?’

‘I was stunned.’

‘Did you notice that, after the priest had spoken, several people turned to look at you?’

‘No.’

‘I have here the testimony of the tinsmith, Pirou, who is also a local constable and who swears to this.’

‘It’s possible ... I don’t see how anyone in Saint-Justin could have known.’

‘Known what?’

‘About my relations with Andrée.’

‘You went straight home from church without visiting your mother’s grave.’

‘My wife and I had agreed to go the cemetery that afternoon.’

‘Along the way, the blacksmith Didier, your closest neighbour, joined you and walked a bit of the way with you. He said, “It was certainly bound to happen eventually, but I wasn’t expecting it to come so soon. There’s one woman who’s going to be pleased!”’

‘Perhaps he did say that. I don’t remember.’

‘Perhaps you were too overwhelmed to notice?’

What could he say? Yes? No? He had run out of words. He was numb. All he remembered was holding Marianne’s little hand in its woollen glove and the rain starting up again.

The phone rang on the magistrate’s desk, interrupting the interrogation with a long conversation about someone named Martin, a jewellery store and a witness unwilling to say what he knew.

From what Tony could hear, the public prosecutor was on the other end of the line, a self-important man whom he had seen for only half an hour and who frightened him.

Diem did not frighten him; it was a much different feeling. Tony felt that it would have taken so little for them to understand each other, even become friends, but it never quite happened.

‘Please excuse me, Monsieur Falcone.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Where were we? Ah, yes: your return from high mass. I suppose you told your wife the news?’

‘My daughter did. At the front door she let go of my hand and ran in to the kitchen.’

The house had its Sunday smell, the aroma of the roast Gisèle was basting with meat juices, crouching in front of the open oven. They ate roast

beef every Sunday, studded with cloves, served with peas and mashed potatoes. On Tuesdays it turned into pot-au-feu.

He hadn't realized, at the time, how comforting these homey traditions were.

'Do you remember what your little girl said?'

'She was all excited and blurted out, "Mama! Important news! Nicolas is dead!"'

'How did your wife react?'

'She turned to me and asked, "Is it true, Tony?"'

He was lying again, leaving something out, and would not look the magistrate in the eye. Gisèle had actually gone pale and almost dropped her wooden spoon. He had been as upset as she was. It was a good moment before she had murmured, almost to herself, 'He was the one who served me, only yesterday ...'

That was something he could tell the magistrate. Although there wasn't anything really dangerous in what followed, he preferred not to mention it in front of him. Marianne had spoken up.

'I'll be going to the funeral?'

'Children don't go to funerals.'

'Josette did!'

'Because it was her grandfather who died.'

Marianne had gone in to the next room to play, and that's when Gisèle had asked, without looking at her husband, 'What will Andrée do?'

'I've no idea.'

'Shouldn't you go and pay your respects?'

'Not today. There'll be time enough the morning of the funeral.'

'It must have happened yesterday evening or last night ...'

She hadn't been herself for the rest of the day.

'How about the next few days?' asked the magistrate pointedly.

'I was hardly ever at home.'

'You didn't try to find out how Nicolas had died?'

'I did not set foot in the village.'

'Not even to pick up your mail?'

‘I went just to the post office, no further.’

Diem consulted his file.

‘I see that, although the grocery store was closed on All Saints, it opened its doors the morning of All Souls’ Day.’

‘It’s the village custom.’

‘Who was behind the counter?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Your wife didn’t buy anything at Despierre’s that day?’

‘I don’t recall. She probably did.’

‘But she said nothing to you?’

‘No.’

What he did know was that it was raining, the trees were flailing in the wind, and Marianne was grumpy, the way she always was when bad weather kept her from playing outside.

‘I will tell you what transpired in the grocery store. For several days, Nicolas Despierre had been taciturn, on edge, which usually happened before a fit.

‘In such a case, on the orders of Dr Riquet – who has confirmed this – he would take a mild sedative.

‘On 31 October, his mother came to see him towards eight in the evening, after dinner, while Andrée was doing the dishes, and she complained that she was coming down with the flu.’

Tony had already heard about this.

‘Do you know, Monsieur Falcone, that on that evening, most unusually, Dr Riquet had gone to Niort to see his sister, who was ill, and that he would not return to Saint-Justin until the following morning?’

‘I did not.’

‘I suppose that he was also your family doctor. So you know that he almost never left the village and did not take many holidays. Late on the afternoon of the previous day, he had come to the store to see Nicolas and inform him of this brief trip.’

With his bushy beard, the doctor looked like a water spaniel and was not at all above playing a few hands of cards and downing a few drinks at the

Café de la Gare.

‘Madame Despierre’s flu; Dr Riquet out of town: you see what I’m getting at? At three in the morning, your friend Andrée phoned the doctor as if she hadn’t heard of his absence. Only the maid was there, for Madame Riquet had accompanied her husband.

‘Instead of calling a doctor in Triant, she went in her dressing gown to awaken her mother-in-law in her cottage, and when the two women returned to the upstairs bedroom, Nicolas was dead.’

He listened, acutely uncomfortable, uncertain how to respond.

‘Since it was too late in any case, Madame Despierre did not see the point of summoning a doctor unfamiliar with the village, and it was only at eleven the following morning that Dr Riquet arrived at Nicolas’ bedside.

‘Given the patient’s history, after a brief examination, he signed the death certificate. Later on, Dr Riquet explained the medical reasons why the overwhelming majority of his colleagues would have done the same.

‘Nevertheless, rumours were rampant in the village the next day. You knew nothing about them?’

‘No.’

This time, he meant it. It was only much later that he had learned, to his amazement, that in Saint-Justin he and Andrée were already an item of interest.

‘You know the countryside better than I do, Monsieur Falcone. So you shouldn’t be surprised that those involved rarely learn of such rumours, and of course the authorities are the last to know.

‘It took months and further developments for tongues to begin to wag. Even then, Inspector Mani and I have had a lot of trouble obtaining viable statements.

‘With patience, we did compile this thick dossier, a copy of which has been sent to your lawyer. Maître Demarié must have discussed this with you.’

He nodded. In reality, he still did not understand. For eleven months, he and Andrée had taken every imaginable precaution to keep their affair a secret.

Not only had Tony done his best to stay away from the grocery store, but when he had to go there, he would speak to Nicolas, not his wife. If he saw Andrée among the crowd at the market in Triant, he would simply nod at her in greeting.

Aside from their encounter in September, at the roadside, they had met only in the blue room and would arrive there separately, each by a different door, leaving their respective cars at some distance from the hotel.

Neither his brother nor his sister-in-law had talked, he was sure of it. And he had equal confidence in Françoise's discretion.

'You two were so linked in the public's mind that, at the funeral, everyone was watching you and feeling sorry for your wife.'

He had sensed that, and it had terrified him.

'It's hard to say how these rumours spring up, but, once they have, nothing can stop them. The first gossip was that Nicolas had died at a good time and that his wife must feel relieved.

'Then someone mentioned the doctor's absence that night, so convenient for a person hoping to rid herself of the grocer under the cover of his fits.

'Had he been called earlier, when Nicolas was still alive, Dr Riquet would doubtless have made a different diagnosis.'

All this was true. He could say nothing in reply.

'It was also widely remarked that at the burial you stood at the very back of the throng, as if to keep as far as possible from your mistress, and this behaviour was seen by some as a ruse.'

He wiped his face with his handkerchief, because he was in a sweat. For months he had lived without ever suspecting that people were spying on him and that everyone in Saint-Justin knew he was Andrée's lover and was wondering what was going to happen.

'Really, Falcone, do you think your wife could not have known what was common knowledge? That she wasn't waiting, as they were, for what would come next?'

He shook his head, feebly, for he no longer knew quite what to think.

'Supposing she had learned of your affair with Andrée: would she have talked to you about it?'

‘Perhaps not ...’

Certainly not. It was not in her nature. For she had never mentioned other adventures that she had known about.

Not for anything in the world would he have lived through that winter again, and yet he had never felt so strongly bound to his family, to the feeling that the three of them formed a whole, a sensation of almost animal intimacy, as if he were huddled deep in a den with his mate and their offspring.

The atmosphere in the house, painted in the cheerful colours they had chosen, had become heavy, oppressive. When he had to leave on business, he did so unwillingly, conscious of some danger that might threaten while he was away.

‘You did not see your mistress at all over the winter, Monsieur Falcone?’

‘I may have caught a glimpse of her at a distance. I swear that I did not speak even one word to her.’

‘You did not go to meet her again at your brother’s hotel?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Did she not, several times, put out the signal?’

‘I saw it only once. I was careful, particularly on Thursdays, to avoid Rue Neuve.’

‘So you did go by there one Thursday. When?’

‘Early in December. I was going to the station and I took the quickest route. I was startled to see the towel up in the window and wondered if it was intentional.’

‘You did not go to Triant that day?’

‘No.’

‘Did you see the Citroën go by?’

‘Only on her way home. I was in my office when I heard her honk her horn two or three times as she went by.’

‘Did your brother tell you about her visit?’

‘Yes.’

‘And he told you that she had gone directly to the blue room, that according to Françoise, she’d undressed there and waited for you, on the

bed, for more than half an hour?’

‘Yes.’

‘What message did she give Françoise for you?’

‘That it was vital that we talk.’

‘Did Françoise describe the state she was in after waiting for that half-hour?’

‘She confessed that Andrée had frightened her.’

‘What did she mean?’

‘She couldn’t explain it.’

‘Did you talk to your brother about this?’

‘Yes. He advised me to drop the whole thing. Those were the words he used. I told him that I’d broken the affair off a long time ago. Then he said, “It may be over for you, but not for her!”’

The autumn rains had lasted until mid-December, flooding low-lying fields, followed by a serious cold snap and then, on 20 or 21 December, by snow. Marianne was beside herself with joy and rushed to the window every morning to make sure the snow hadn’t melted.

‘I want so much for it to last until Christmas!’

She had never yet been treated to a white Christmas, for earlier years had brought only rain or frost.

Now that she was a big girl, as she proudly claimed after starting school, she had helped her father decorate the Christmas tree and had herself placed the plaster shepherds and sheep around the manger.

‘You insist you knew nothing of what was happening in the Despierre family?’

‘I knew, through my wife, that the mother had returned to the counter in the store, but that the two women were still not talking to each other.’

‘Wasn’t there some mention of a lawsuit?’

‘I overheard a conversation about that in a café.’

His job sometimes involved spending a certain amount of time in small village cafés, most of them dimly lit, where men simply sat nursing beers,

their discussions growing louder as the hours went by. There were six cafés in Saint-Justin, although three of them did good business only on fair days.

‘And did you expect as well that the two women would wind up going to court?’

‘Your Honour, I tell you I paid no attention to all that.’

‘Still, you were aware of the situation?’

‘Like everyone else. The word was that old Madame Despierre, crafty as she was, had made a bad bargain, and that Andrée had come out the winner in the end.’

‘You didn’t know if that was true?’

‘How could I have?’

‘Your mistress, during your eleven-month liaison, did not tell you that she and her husband owned everything in common?’

‘We never discussed her marriage.’

They had spent so little time talking that they might better have not talked at all. And the magistrate proved it by returning once more to that last Thursday in the blue room.

‘Still, you did speak of your future together.’

‘Those words were just air, we didn’t take them seriously.’

‘She didn’t? You’re sure about Andrée? Allow me to remind you that two months before the death of her husband, she was anticipating that event.’

He was about to protest, but Diem kept talking.

‘Perhaps not specifically, but she was alluding to his disappearance when she asked you how you would feel when she became free.’

He would have given anything – an arm, a leg, an eye – if only certain words had never been spoken! He was ashamed to have heard them without protest and hated that other Tony standing before the mirror, dabbing at his bloody lip, proud of his nakedness in the sunlight, of being an admired, handsome male, of seeing his seed dripping from any female’s vulva.

‘Would you like to live with me always?’

And a little later, *‘Are you still bleeding?’*

She was pleased at herself for having bitten him, obliging him to go home and show his wife and daughter the mark of their lovemaking!

‘What will you say, if she asks about it?’

She: that was Gisèle, and he had spoken of her so carelessly, as if she were of no importance.

‘I’ll tell her I bumped into my windshield, say, from braking too suddenly.’

He felt the treachery of those words so deeply that when Marianne, not Gisèle, had asked him about his swollen lip, he had changed his explanation and turned the windshield into a lamp-post.

‘Would you like to spend your whole life with me?’

What would have happened if the train hadn’t whistled, as if to shout at him in warning, when she was saying in her throaty voice, *‘Tell me, Tony. If I became free ...’*

Now he hated those words!

‘Would you free yourself too?’

Could he admit to the magistrate that he had heard those words throbbing in his ears all winter, that they haunted him at the table in the kitchen with its steamed-up windows, that he was even saying them over to himself at the very moment when his daughter was discovering the toys under the Christmas tree?

‘The grocery store on Rue Neuve,’ continued Diem implacably, ‘the houses, the farms, the hamlet of La Guipotte now belong to the two women, and Andrée Despierre has the right to force the public auction of the entire estate in order to collect her part of the inheritance.’

He paused for a long moment.

‘There’s been a lot of talk about this in Saint-Justin, hasn’t there?’

‘I believe so. Yes.’

‘Was it not felt that old lady Despierre would never accept having part of her property fall into the hands of strangers? Isn’t that why she returned to the store, beside the daughter-in-law she detests and to whom she refuses to speak? Everything depended on Andrée, and her decision depended on yours ...’

He gave a start and couldn’t help opening his mouth as if to object ...

‘I’m telling you what everyone was saying. That’s why they watched you, wondering whose side you would take. Old lady Despierre belongs to the village, she’s one of them, even if they resent her stubborn greed.

‘As for Andrée, they’ve never liked her grand airs and only tolerated her out of respect for her father’s memory.

‘And you: not only were your parents foreigners, but you abandoned the area for ten years, and people wondered why you had returned.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘Nothing in particular. The betting was on. Many people expected that Andrée would have everything sold, going to court if necessary, and that once in possession of the spoils she’d leave Saint-Justin with you.

‘The person everyone felt the sorriest for was your wife, despite her lack of strong ties to the villagers. Do you know what some of them called her? “The sweet little lady who tries so hard”.’

Diem smiled as he placed an index finger on one of the files.

‘Everything I’ve told you today is in here, in black and white. They all talked in the end. Your lawyer, I repeat, has a copy of this file. He could have been present during these interviews. He decided, with your approval, to leave you on your own.’

‘I asked him to.’

‘I know. Although I still don’t understand why.’

What use was it to explain that, when he went to confession, the priest behind the grille didn’t bother him, but a third person would have turned him mute. And although Diem feigned astonishment, he knew this so well that, whenever he tackled a difficult point, a delicate matter, he was careful to send away his clerk.

‘And now, Monsieur Falcone, shall we discuss the two last letters, the ones sent at the end of December and on 20 January?’



5.

His lawyer, too, kept on at him about the letters.

‘Why don’t you tell the truth about them as you did about everything else? You definitely received those letters. The postmaster in Saint-Justin could not possibly have invented them.’

Like a kid who has lied and is too proud to admit it, he would say over and over, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

In his case, it wasn’t pride, but perhaps a remnant of loyalty to the blue room. He had never intended to marry Andrée. Even if they had both been free, if neither of them had been married, it would never have occurred to him to make her his wife.

Why? He didn’t know.

‘Admit that her passion unnerved you,’ Professor Bigot had suggested. ‘It must have been a shock when you discovered, that September evening next to the little wood, that the woman you’d thought of as a statue, calm and aloof, could change into a sexually voracious female.’

‘It did surprise me.’

‘Flattered you, too, probably. Because it now seems that she was sincere in claiming to have loved you ever since you were in school together.’

‘I felt somewhat responsible.’

‘Responsible for this passion?’

‘That isn’t the right word ... It seemed to me that I owed her something. This isn’t quite the right comparison, but when a lost cat starts following you, meowing pitifully, and then camps out on your doorstep, you feel responsible for what might happen to it.’

Bigot seemed to understand. This interview took place during the second or third week of Tony’s imprisonment. The first time he had left his cell had been to go to the courthouse, and exceptional precautions had been taken on account of the reporters, photographers and eager onlookers packing the main staircase there.

Just as he had been about to climb into the Black Maria, the prison warden had rushed up, alerted by a phone call from the public prosecutor, and he had been returned to his cell for almost an hour.

When they had brought him out again, he was no longer escorted by gendarmes but by Inspector Mani and a plainclothes policeman. The police van was not in the prison courtyard, having been sent on with two relatively unknown detainees to mislead the crowd.

He had gone off in an ordinary car without special markings, which had pulled up near a small door at the back of the courthouse.

They had played the same game for two weeks. Stirred up by the press, the public had turned against him to the point of threatening violence.

Two months had passed. Most of the journalists from Paris and other big cities had left Poitiers, leaving the job of following the case to local correspondents and press agency representatives.

Now and then he had come across images in magazines and newsreels of defendants being hustled through crowds to get to court or prison, protected by policemen and trying to hide their faces.

Now he was like them, except that he did not cover his face. Did he look like them? Like someone already excluded from human society and unable to understand why?

He kept himself under control. Before the examining magistrate, he did not behave like a hunted man. He answered questions as best he could, like a good schoolboy, proud of his sincerity and attention to detail, except on

the subject of the letters. He was convinced that if he gave in on that point, he would never see the end of it.

He had received the December letter on New Year's Eve. The frozen snow crackled underfoot. People were beginning to call out 'Happy New Year!' when they met.

'And a Happy New Year to you, too!'

The sky was clear, the air crisp. Some kids were taking turns sliding down the middle of Rue Neuve. The postmaster had made no comment when handing over his mail, which Tony usually glanced through off in a corner of the post office.

Happy Our Year.

The blow to his heart, the pain, had been more violent this time. He sensed some mysterious menace in this message. The words had been carefully chosen, that was obvious, and he struggled to understand them. Wasn't that 'our' the core of Andrée's thinking?

He had burned it, this last letter of the year, for the banks of the Orneau were sheathed in ice, and the river was down to a trickle.

The next morning, he had gone with his wife and child to wish old Angelo a Happy New Year. His father had hardly said a word, not looking even once at Marianne, and Tony thought he knew why. Didn't she remind him of both his dead wife and daughter?

As they did every year, they had gone that afternoon to see his brother, who had to keep the hotel and café open for the holiday.

Early that morning he had found his wife alone in the kitchen and had hugged her tight for a long time, her head leaning against his shoulder.

'Happy New Year, Gisèle.'

Had she sensed the special intensity of his emotion? Had she understood how worried he was, how afraid that this new year would not be a happy one for them?

'Happy New Year, Tony.'

Then she had looked up at him and smiled. She could never really manage a big smile, though, so it had made him feel more wistful than relieved.

Ever since Marianne had started school, he and his wife had eaten their midday meal together. Since many children attended from farms several kilometres away and hadn't the time to go home for lunch, the teacher had set up a canteen. Marianne, who loved being at school, had begged her parents to let her eat there.

'She's going through a phase,' Gisèle told him. 'I'm sure that next year, she'll change her mind.'

It wasn't always easy for Tony to sit across from Gisèle while trying to hide all his worries from her. What did they say to each other? Silence made them both uneasy, and they would talk lightly about anything at all, meaningless chitchat, and be startled whenever they both simply ran out of words.

The last letter had made things still worse. Andrée was practically giving him an order and reminding him of what she considered a promise. The message was only two words, written in big letters that took up the whole page.

Now You!

He had opened the envelope, as always, in the post office, on the desk with the violet ink, a broken pen and the forms for telegrams and postal orders. He could not have said afterwards how he had behaved; strangely, no doubt, because, behind his little window, Monsieur Bouvier had been concerned and asked him if he had received bad news.

'I'd never seen him like that before,' the postmaster would later tell the magistrate. 'He looked like a man who'd just received a death sentence. He didn't answer, just looked at me, but I'm not sure he even saw me. Then he rushed outside without stopping to close the door.'

Fortunately, he had been planning to visit some farms and had his car with him that day. He drove aimlessly, staring hard at the road, without a

thought for the customers awaiting him. He went wherever the road took him, trying desperately to see those two words in some reassuring light yet knowing it was hopeless. They could mean only one thing: 'Your turn!'

'When I think of the years you cost me ...'

She wasn't going to waste any more time. Now that she had taken possession of him, she would finally see her childhood dream, still alive after all those years, come true.

Could she really have waited so long for Tony without anything breaking that spell?

The psychiatrist seemed to think so. Perhaps he had seen similar cases.

Andrée was telling him, in no uncertain terms: 'I've done my part; now you do yours.'

Or else? Because the threat was understood. He had not protested when she had said, behind his back, *'Tell me, Tony. If I became free ...'*

And free she had been, for two months now, after developments he refused to think about. Free and rich. Free to do as she liked with the rest of her life without answering to anyone.

'Would you free yourself too?'

He had not replied. Didn't she know, in her heart of hearts, that he had deliberately avoided answering her? True, there had been that strident, outraged whistle from the train ... Andrée might have imagined that he had said yes, or had nodded in reply.

Now you!

If she truly wasn't expecting him to refuse, what did she think he would do?

Divorce his wife? Go to Gisèle and tell her point-blank ...

Unthinkable. He had nothing against his wife. He had known what he was doing when he married her. He didn't want an impassioned mistress for a wife but a woman exactly like Gisèle, and her shy modesty had not displeased him – on the contrary.

One doesn't spend one's life in a bed with someone, in a room glowing with sunshine, in the naked embrace of bodily passion.

Gisèle was his companion, Marianne's mother, the first one downstairs in the morning to light the fire, the one who kept the house clean and cheerful, welcoming him without any questions when he came home.

They would grow closer together as they grew old together, for they would have more and more memories to share. Sometimes Tony imagined the conversations they would have in later years, when they began to feel their age.

'You remember that grand passion of yours?'

Who knows? Gisèle's smile might ripen with time into its full glory. And flattered, a touch ashamed, he might reply, 'Oh, that's a bit of an exaggeration.'

'If you could have seen yourself, when you came home from Triant!'

'I was young ...'

'Luckily, I already knew you rather well by then. I had faith in you, although sometimes I did feel afraid. Especially after Nicolas died. Then she was suddenly free ...'

'She tried ...'

'To get you to ask for a divorce? Sometimes I even wonder if she didn't love you more than I did.'

He would take her hand, in the twilight. Because he imagined them together in front of their house, in the summer, with night coming on.

'I pity her. Even back then there were days when I felt sorry for her.'

And now he was being ordered, in two words, to have done with Gisèle!

Now you!

The more he considered those words, the more sinister they became. Andrée had not divorced Nicolas. He had died. In the bedroom above the grocery store, she was the only one who had witnessed his death agony. She had waited until he was gone before crossing the garden to alert her mother-in-law.

Was it really a divorce she had in mind for him?

Now you!

Driving around without knowing where he was, sometimes he screamed in rage: 'Now you! Now you! Now you! Now you ...'

How could he awaken from this nightmare? Go to Andrée's house and tell her straight out: 'I will never divorce my wife. I love her.'

'What about me?'

Would he dare reply, 'I don't love you'?

'But ...'

She was capable of cutting right to the heart of his thoughts with a glare of defiance.

'But you let me kill Nicolas.'

He had suspected her right away. So had Gisèle. Along with most of the villagers. It was only an intuition. People didn't know what had happened. Maybe she had simply let him die by not sending for help.

He had had nothing to do with it.

'You know perfectly well, Andrée, that ...'

He couldn't even run away from her by leaving Saint-Justin with his family. He had not yet finished paying off his house, the shed, the equipment. He was only just beginning to enjoy a certain prosperity and provide his family with a comfortable life.

It was unbelievable, it made no sense. He wound up stopping at an inn for a drink. Tony's sobriety was so well known that the woman who served him, while keeping an eye on her baby playing on the floor, began worrying about him, too. She would give evidence later on as well.

Undaunted by the stubborn silence of these country people, Inspector Mani had kept returning to the attack for however long it would take.

'Shall I read you the testimony of the postmaster regarding that last letter?'

'There's no need.'

'You mean that he lied, that he imagined the incident of the door left wide open?'

'I don't mean anything.'

'One of the farmers you were supposed to meet that morning telephoned your house to see if you'd been delayed or were not coming. Your wife told him that you were on your way. Is that correct?'

'Probably.'

‘Where did you go?’

‘I don’t recall.’

‘In general, you have a remarkable memory. At the Auberge des Quatre Vents, you drank, not wine or beer, but brandy. You rarely drink spirits. You had four brandies in quick succession, then looked at the clock behind the counter and appeared surprised that it was already noon ...’

He had driven very fast, hoping to get home before lunchtime. Gisèle had realized he had been drinking, and for a moment he resented her for it. Just because he had married her, did that give her the right to spend her time watching him? He had had enough of being spied on! She wasn’t saying anything, true, but that was worse than if she had scolded him.

He was free! A free man! And whether his wife liked it or not, he was the head of the family. He was the one who earned their living, slaving away to bring them up in the world. Everything depended on him!

She kept quiet and, at the other end of the table, so did he, glancing at her furtively now and then, a little abashed, for he knew deep down that he was wrong. He should not have had those drinks.

‘You know, it isn’t my fault. With the customers, it’s rude to refuse.’

‘That reminds me, Brambois called.’

Why did people force him to lie? It was humiliating, and he bitterly resented it.

‘I didn’t have time to go to his farm because I was delayed somewhere else.’

Now you! Now you! Now you!

She was right there in front of him, eating he didn’t even know what, doing her best not to look at him because she could tell he was annoyed.

What did Andrée want of him? That he kill her?

There! He had done it. He was finally daring to confront the thoughts that had been seething in his mind. Hadn’t Professor Bigot, by drilling ever deeper with his careful questions, helped him to reach this point?

He hadn’t told him everything, of course. Against all evidence, he still denied knowing anything about the letters.

The fact remained: on that day, the day of the last message and the four brandies (a local 65 proof *marc* that burned its way down), he had asked himself that question while having lunch with his wife.

Was this what Andrée was demanding of him? That he kill his wife?

Abruptly, his inebriation turned maudlin: he was to blame. He felt impelled to ask for forgiveness. He reached across the table to take his wife's hand.

'Listen! Don't be angry at me. I'm a little drunk.'

'You'll have a rest after lunch.'

'It upsets you, doesn't it?'

'No, really ...'

'I know it does. I am not behaving the way I should.'

He had the feeling he was going out on a limb.

'Are you angry at me, Gisèle?'

'For what?'

'You do worry about me, admit it.'

'I like it better when you're happy ...'

'And you think I'm not? Is that it? Don't I have everything? I have the best wife ever, a daughter just like her whom I adore, a beautiful house, a thriving business. So why wouldn't I be happy? All right! I do worry about some things at times. When you're born in a shack without electricity or running water out in La Boisselle, it isn't all that easy to set up on your own. Think how far we've come since I met you in Poitiers. I was only a common working man then ...'

He talked, talked, growing more and more wound up.

'I'm the happiest man in the world, Gisèle, and if anyone claims otherwise, you can tell him from me he's lying. The happiest of men, you hear me?'

He was weeping now, choking back a sob as he dashed upstairs to lock himself in the bathroom.

Gisèle never said a word to him about this.

‘Forgive me for asking you this question yet again, Monsieur Falcone. It will be the last time. Did you receive those letters?’

Tony shook his head as if to say that all he could do was say no. Diem expected this and turned to his clerk.

‘Please bring in Madame Despierre.’

If Tony flinched, it was barely visible. In any case, he did not show the emotional reaction the magistrate expected – because for everyone in Saint-Justin, ‘Madame Despierre’ meant Nicolas’ mother, not his wife, whom no one would ever have called by that name. Andrée was the daughter-in-law or, for the older villagers, the Formier girl.

He was wondering how the old woman could ever shed any light on the letters. He didn’t relish the idea of having to face her, but that was all. He had stood up automatically and was waiting, half turned towards the door.

And when that door opened abruptly, he was staring at Andrée. A corpulent man with the air of a bon vivant followed her in, as well as one of the gendarmes, but Tony saw only her, only her white face, which seemed even paler against her black dress.

She was staring at him as well, serenely, her features softened by a faint smile, and one might have thought that she was calmly taking possession of him, engulfing him.

‘Hello, Tony.’

That throaty voice of hers, a touch hoarse, enveloping him. He did not return her greeting. He could not have spoken and did not want to. He nodded brusquely to her and turned towards Diem as if seeking his protection.

‘Remove her handcuffs.’

Still smiling, she held her wrists out to the gendarme, and he heard the double click he knew so well.

In Saint-Justin, he had not noticed, the few times he had seen her since her husband’s death, that she was in mourning. Her face had grown plumper in prison, and her body as well, just enough to make her clothes fit more tightly. It was the first time he had ever seen her wear black stockings.

After the gendarme left, there was an instant of uncertainty. They all stood there in the tiny office, with the sun shining directly in. The clerk was the first to sit down again, in front of his papers at the end of the table, while the fat man with Andrée remarked, surprised, ‘My colleague Demarié isn’t here?’

‘Monsieur Falcone does not wish him to be – unless he changes his mind, for this particular confrontation. In which case I should not have to look far, as he has informed me that he will be in the building until six o’clock. What shall it be, Monsieur Falcone?’

The question startled him.

‘Do you wish me to summon your lawyer?’

‘What for?’

Diem and Maître Capade then walked to the window to have a quiet discussion of some legal matters. Still standing, Tony and Andrée were hardly an arm’s length apart; he might almost have touched her. She was still gazing at him with the dazzled eyes of a child given an unexpected toy.

‘Tony ...’

It was barely a murmur; her lips moved simply to form his name. As for him, he looked away from her, relieved when the conversation at the window ended and the magistrate drew up a chair for the young woman.

‘Sit down. You, too, Monsieur Falcone. There is another chair, Maître.’

With everyone seated, Diem rummaged through his files to pull out a small diary bound in black oilcloth, the kind sold in the grocery store.

‘Do you recognize this object, Madame Despierre?’

‘I have already told you, yes.’

‘That you have. I am obliged to ask you a certain number of questions that I have already put to you and I remind you that your replies are a matter of record, which does not prevent you from reconsidering or correcting them.’

Perhaps because of the lawyer’s presence, the magistrate’s manner seemed more formal than it was with Tony, almost pompous.

‘The notations here have mostly to do with shopping lists, appointments with the dentist or dressmaker,’ he said softly, skimming through the book.

‘This is last year’s diary, and the dates of your meetings with Tony Falcone are underlined.’

He had no idea that this diary would play a decisive role in his fate, or that – had he known of its contents earlier – he might have escaped at least one of the accusations against him.

‘The last time we spoke, I asked you the meaning of these little circles I see in every month.’

‘I told you that they marked the dates of my periods.’

She spoke without any false modesty. A few weeks earlier, Tony, too, had been asked equally intimate questions.

‘Everyone in Saint-Justin,’ Diem had told him, ‘thought Nicolas was sterile, if not impotent, and the fact is that after eight years of marriage, his wife has had no children. Dr Riquet, moreover, has confirmed that he was probably sterile. Did you know this?’

‘I had heard it said.’

‘Fine! Now remember the extremely detailed account you gave me of your meeting on 2 August in what you call the blue room of the Hôtel des Voyageurs, from which we may conclude that during your amorous encounters with your mistress you took no precautions to avoid pregnancy.’

When he did not reply, the magistrate continued.

‘Did you behave the same way during your other extra-marital affairs?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you recall a certain Jeanne, who is a farm worker employed by one of your customers? Inspector Mani questioned her, promising that her name would not appear in the case file or be introduced in a public hearing. You had sexual relations with her three times. The first time, during the act, when she seemed frightened, you whispered in her ear, “Don’t be scared, I’ll pull out in time.”

‘From this I deduce that this was your habit in such situations. If you deny this, I will have other persons with whom you have had relations identified and questioned.’

‘I do not deny it.’

‘In that case, tell me why, with Andrée Despierre and with her alone, you never took even any basic precautions.’

‘She’s the one who ...’

‘Did she bring up the subject?’

No. But the first time, she had held him close when he had tried to withdraw. Surprised, he had almost asked her, ‘Aren’t you afraid?’

There at the roadside near Bois de Sarelle, he had concluded that she would take the necessary steps when she got home. Later, at the Hôtel des Voyageurs, he had realized she was doing nothing of the sort.

If he hadn’t immediately grasped the connection between the magistrate’s question and the accusation brought against him, he soon would.

‘Is that not the way you would both have behaved if you had decided to live together, no matter what happened? To be unconcerned about Andrée’s possible pregnancy, Monsieur Falcone, means that such an eventuality would have changed nothing, except perhaps to force you to accelerate your plans, isn’t that so?’

He had left that session utterly demoralized, wondering if the magistrate had ever in his life had a mistress.

Today, however, Diem did not seem inclined to revisit the point.

‘I see here, on 1 September, a cross followed by the number 1. Would you tell us what that means?’

Still completely at ease, she looked at the magistrate, then at Tony, smiling at him in encouragement.

‘It’s the date of my first letter.’

‘Be more precise, would you? To whom did you write that day?’

‘To Tony, naturally.’

‘Why?’

‘When my husband took the train to Triant, on 2 August, I realized that he was suspicious and I didn’t dare return to Vincent’s hotel.’

‘So you were no longer using the agreed-upon signal?’

‘That’s right. Tony had been quite shaken when he saw Nicolas on Place de la Gare. I didn’t want him to keep fretting because he thought some drama might be taking place.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘He might have thought there had been violent scenes between me and my husband, that Nicolas had told his mother and that they were making life difficult for me, or who knows what, when in reality I had managed to come up with a plausible explanation for my presence at the hotel.’

‘Do you remember what you wrote?’

‘Perfectly. “Everything is fine.” I added, “Don’t be afraid.”’

Diem turned towards him.

‘Do you still deny this, Monsieur Falcone?’

Andrée turned to him in perplexity.

‘Why would you deny it? Didn’t you get my letters?’

He was baffled, even wondered if she might actually be unaware of her situation and not suspect the trap into which they were leading her.

‘Let’s continue. Perhaps you will soon change your mind. Second cross, 25 September this time. What did the second letter say?’

She did not need to search her memory. She knew the letters by heart, the way he knew everything that had been said in the blue room on that afternoon of 2 August.

‘It was simply a greeting. “I haven’t forgotten. I love you.”’

‘Let me point out that, according to your own recollection, you did not write “I haven’t forgotten you” ...’

‘No. I hadn’t forgotten.’

‘What hadn’t you forgotten?’

‘Everything. Our love. Our promises.’

‘The 10th of October was three weeks before your husband’s death. During an earlier interview, you provided the text of this third letter: “Soon! I love you.” What did you mean by “soon”?’

Still imperturbable, she replied, first darting a reassuring glance at Tony.

‘That we would soon be able to renew our rendezvous.’

‘Why?’

‘I had succeeded in allaying all Nicolas’ suspicions.’

‘Wasn’t it rather that you knew he would not live much longer?’

‘I have already explained this to you twice. He was very ill, and might well have lingered on for a few years – or suddenly passed away, and his mother and I had just been reminded of that by Dr Riquet, a few days earlier.’

‘When?’

‘When he had had one of his fits. They were becoming more frequent, and he was having increasing trouble with his digestion.’

Tony listened in disbelief. At moments he found himself thinking that Diem, Andrée and her lawyer, nodding his head in approval, had banded together to put on this show for him. The questions flooding his mind should have been asked by the magistrate – who was taking pains to avoid them!

‘We now come to 29 December. The New Year is around the corner. A small cross in your diary.’

She immediately provided the text of her message.

“‘Happy Our Year.’”

With a touch of pride, she added, ‘I spent a long time coming up with that. It might not be good French, but I wanted to emphasize that this year would be ours.’

‘What did you mean by that?’

‘Have you forgotten that Nicolas was dead?’

She was the first to mention this, placidly, with that same unnerving composure.

‘You mean that you were free?’

‘Obviously.’

‘And in that case, there was no longer anything to prevent the coming year from being yours, meaning yours and Tony’s?’

She nodded, more coolly self-satisfied than ever. Once again, instead of challenging her assertions, Diem let them stand and picked up another diary, similar to the first.

Only now did Tony realize that he was not the only one to have spent long hours in this room over the past two months. His lawyer had, of course, informed him of the arrest of Andrée, ten or twelve days after his

own. She had been interrogated, obviously, but he hadn't really thought about what that meant. He had never imagined that her testimony could have as much weight, if not more, than his own.

'There is one letter left, Madame Despierre, the shortest but most significant one, consisting of only two words.'

Andrée crowed defiantly, "'Now you!'"

'Would you explain to us, as clearly as possible, what you meant by that?'

'Isn't it plain enough? As you said yourself, I was free. Once I was out of mourning ...'

'Just a moment! Was it because you were in mourning that you did not resume your meetings at the hotel after your husband's death?'

'That was part of it, but also because I was in litigation with my mother-in-law, and if this had led to a lawsuit, our liaison might have been damaging to me.'

'So you did not set the towel in the window after All Saints' Day?'

'Once.'

'Did you see your lover?'

'No.'

'Did you go up to the room?'

'I undressed as usual,' she announced boldly, 'convinced that he would come.'

'Was there anything you needed to talk over with him?'

'If there had been, I wouldn't have waited there naked.'

'Did you not have any matters to discuss with him?'

'Such as?'

'Among other things, how he was going to get himself free.'

'That had been decided long before.'

'On 2 August?'

'That wasn't the first time.'

'You'd agreed that he would get a divorce?'

'I'm not sure that exact word was used, but that's what I understood.'

'Do you hear that, Falcone?'

Turning to him, she opened her eyes wide.

‘You haven’t told them?’

Then she turned back to the magistrate.

‘I don’t see what’s so extraordinary about this. People get divorced every day. We love each other. I loved him already when I was just a little girl and if I resigned myself to marrying Nicolas, it was because Tony had gone away, and I was convinced he would never return.

‘When we found each other again, we both realized that we belonged to one another for ever.’

He wanted to protest, to stand up and shout: ‘No! No! Stop this! It’s all a lie! It’s all fake!’

He just sat there, too confounded to make a move. Could she really believe what she was saying? She was speaking simply, dispassionately, as if all this were perfectly normal, with nothing inexplicable or tragic about it!

‘And so, when you wrote “Now you”, what you were thinking was ...’

‘That I was waiting for him. That it was up to him to do what was necessary ...’

‘To ask for a divorce?’

She paused a moment – was it deliberate? – before replying, ‘Yes’.

Now it was Tony the magistrate glanced at in complicity before continuing to question Andrée, as if to say, ‘Listen to this, it will interest you.’

And in an even voice, without a trace of irony or sarcasm, he asked her, ‘Did you ever give a thought to the misery this would bring to Gisèle Falcone?’

‘She would not have cried for very long.’

‘How do you know? Didn’t she love her husband?’

‘Not the way I did. Women like that aren’t capable of real love.’

‘What about her daughter?’

‘Exactly! Her daughter would have been a consolation to her and, as long as they received some small income, they would have had a nice little life.’

‘You hear that, Falcone?’

The magistrate must have regretted having pushed things that far, for Tony's face was terrifying, almost inhuman with hatred and pain. He rose slowly from his chair, his features frozen, his eyes staring, like a sleepwalker.

His fists were clenched; his arms seemed abnormally long. The fat lawyer, who had turned casually to look at him, now jumped up to stand between him and his client.

Diem signalled urgently to the clerk, who ran to the door.

Although this scene lasted only a few seconds, it seemed to take much longer. The gendarmes came in; one of them roughly slapped handcuffs on Tony, then waited for orders. The magistrate hesitated, looking back and forth between his prisoner and Andrée, who seemed simply surprised.

'I don't understand, Tony, why you ...'

But at a sign from the magistrate she was the one removed from the room. Her lawyer held her arm and pushed her firmly towards the door. She turned around once more to exclaim, 'You know very well that you said yourself ...'

The rest was cut off when the door closed behind them.

'I apologize, Falcone. I had to do that. In a few moments, as soon as the coast is clear, you'll be taken back to prison.'

That evening, Diem told his wife about the episode as he was finishing dinner.

'Today I had to proceed with the cruellest confrontation of my entire career and I hope never to preside again over anything that painful.'

As for Tony, back in his cell, he lay awake all night.



6.

He spent two days in a kind of stupor, emerging only now and then in a brief burst of rebellion that set him pacing in his cell as if he were going to hurl himself headfirst against the walls.

It was a weekend, and everyone must have gone off to the countryside.

Surprisingly, he had got used to prison life almost immediately, obeying its rules and the guards' orders without protest.

It wasn't until the third day that he felt abandoned. No one came to see him. There was no mention of taking him to the law courts. He listened impatiently to the footsteps in the corridor and stood up whenever someone stopped at his spy hole.

Only later did he realize that the street outside was silent, with almost no traffic, and one of the jailers confirmed at around four that afternoon that that Monday was a holiday.

At ten o'clock the next morning, a sunburned Demarié arrived to see him in his cell. He took his time setting out the papers he removed from his briefcase and getting comfortable, then offered Tony a cigarette and lit one himself.

'I suppose the past three days must have dragged on for ever for you ...'

He gave a little cough, since Tony hadn't bothered to reply and was waiting with discouraging indifference.

‘I’ve received a copy of the transcript from your last interrogation and the confrontation with Andrée Despierre.’

Did he believe in his client’s innocence? Was he still making up his mind?

‘I’d be lying if I said things look good for us. This business of the letters is a disaster and will have an even worse effect on the jury in that you’ve been denying their existence. The messages as reported by the Despierre woman, are they correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘I would like you to answer, truthfully, one question. When you stubbornly denied receiving those letters, was it to avoid implicating your mistress or because you thought the messages were dangerous for you?’

What was the use of trying any more? Men like to think that they act, in all circumstances, for a definite reason. The first time the letters had been mentioned, he hadn’t really thought about it and had never imagined that someone would go and question the postmaster.

It had taken weeks for him to realize how unbelievably hard Inspector Mani and his colleagues had worked, how many people were visited day after day – until they gave in and started talking.

Was there a single person in Saint-Justin, a single local farmer, any regular visitor to the fairs, especially the one in Triant, who hadn’t said his piece?

The reporters had got in on the job as well and churned out whole columns of interviews in the newspapers.

‘I met briefly with Diem, and he gave me to understand that the confrontation was particularly upsetting for you. It seems you lost your head at the end. Andrée, on the contrary, kept up her cool self-confidence. I presume she will behave the same way in court.’

Demarié was making a real effort to rouse him from his apathy.

‘I tried to find out what the magistrate thinks, although his opinion will be far from decisive once the judicial inquiry is over. He doesn’t conceal a certain sympathy for you, yet I would swear that in the almost two months

now since he began his inquiry, he still hasn't managed to make up his mind.'

Why all this nattering, this tedious talk?

'By the way, I happened to run into Bigot, too, on Friday night, at a bridge party given by friends, and he took me aside to tell me he'd learned something rather interesting but, unfortunately, too late for us.

'You have essentially admitted that with Andrée you did not take the usual precautions you did with the other women and that you were not worried that she took none herself, which will lead the jury to conclude that you were not concerned about making her pregnant.'

Tony listened, curious to see where this was going.

'Andrée, as you know, kept track of her periods in her diary. Bigot was intrigued enough to compare the dates with those of your meetings in Triant during the eleven months of your affair. Diem hadn't thought of that, and neither, I admit, had I.

'Do you know how those dates matched up? In absolutely every case, the meetings took place when your mistress was not fertile.

'In other words, Andrée Despierre was taking no chances, a detail that would have been in your favour – without those earlier statements. I'll use it anyway, but it won't have the same impact.'

Tony sank back into indifference, and the lawyer soon gave up.

'I believe you'll be going to the courthouse this afternoon.'

'Will she?'

'No. Just you this time. You still don't want me there?'

What for? Demarié was like the others. He understood no more than they did. His interventions would only complicate things. Still, Tony was glad to know that the little magistrate liked him ...

He saw him again at three o'clock in his chambers. It was drizzling outside, and an umbrella stood dripping in the corner, the clerk's, probably, since the magistrate came to the courthouse in his black Renault 4CV.

Diem had not been out in the sun, for, as he soon explained: 'I took advantage of the long weekend to review the entire dossier. How do you feel today, Falcone? I should warn you, this interview may last some time,

because we've reached Wednesday, 17 February. Will you go over your movements on that day in as much detail as possible?'

He had been expecting this. Each time they had taken him away after a meeting, he had wondered why they hadn't reached this point yet.

The 17th of February was the end, the end of everything, an end he had never foreseen, not even in his worst nightmares, and which he had later realized, however, was logical and fated to happen.

'Would you like me to help you by asking specific questions?'

He nodded. On his own, he would not have known where to begin.

'Your wife got up at the usual time?'

'A little earlier. It had rained all Tuesday morning, so the laundry hadn't dried until mid-afternoon. She was planning to spend the entire day ironing.'

'And you?'

'I came downstairs at 6.30.'

'Did you eat breakfast together? Was there any discussion of your appointments that day? Try to be as accurate as possible.'

Diem had spread out the transcripts of his other statements, the first ones, from interrogations by the lieutenant at Triant – Gaston Joris, with whom Tony had often had an aperitif at his brother's place – and Inspector Mani, a Corsican.

'I'd told her the evening before, that's Tuesday night, that I would have a full day, that I would not be back for lunch and might even be late for dinner.'

'Did you tell her where you'd be as the day went on?'

'I mentioned only the fair at Ambasse, where some clients were expecting me, and a repair job over at Bolin-sur-Sièvre.'

'Wasn't that outside your area?'

'Bolin's only thirty-five kilometres from Saint-Justin, and I was beginning to extend my territory.'

'Did you know at the time that your itinerary was inaccurate?'

'It wasn't completely wrong.'

‘You went upstairs at seven to awaken your daughter. Did you often do that?’

‘Almost every morning. I’d wake her up before having my wash and shave.’

‘You selected your best suit, a blue suit you saved for Sundays.’

‘Because of my appointment in Poitiers. I wanted to look prosperous when I saw Garcia.’

‘We’ll get back to him later. When you came downstairs, your daughter, in the kitchen, was getting ready for school. Before heading for Ambasse and Bolin-sur-Sièvre, you had to drop by the post office, then the station, where you were expecting a package.’

‘A piston I’d ordered for my client in Bolin.’

He had glanced automatically a few times at the empty chair in front of Diem’s desk and finally realized it was the one Andrée had used the week before.

Although just an ordinary chair, it seemed to have remained in the same place since that Friday – and to be bothering Tony, so the magistrate, as he walked up and down the room, set it back against a wall.

‘You offered to drive your daughter to school in the van.’

‘Yes.’

‘Wasn’t that unusual? Did you have no reason, that morning, to be particularly affectionate with her?’

‘No.’

‘Didn’t you ask your wife if there were any errands to run in the village?’

‘No. And I told the inspector that. I was on my way out when Gisèle called me back. She said, “Would you drop by the grocery store to pick up a kilo of sugar and two packets of soap powder? That way I won’t have to change clothes.” Those are her exact words.’

‘You often did that sort of thing?’

Did he have to go through their complete household routine yet again? He had already done that with Mani. Almost every day, as in every household, there were different purchases to make in different places,

including the butcher's shop or the charcuterie. Gisèle avoided sending him there, where customers almost always had to wait.

'She used to say that it wasn't a man's job.'

That Wednesday she wanted to get to her ironing as quickly as possible. Since they'd had a leg of mutton the previous evening, there were leftovers for that day's supper, and there was only the one errand to run.

'So you left with your daughter.'

He could still see, in his rear-view mirror, Gisèle at the front door, wiping her hands on her apron ...

'You dropped Marianne off at the school and headed for the post office. Then?'

'I went inside the grocery store.'

'How long had it been since the last time?'

'Perhaps two months.'

'You hadn't been back there since the last letter, the one that said simply, "Now you!"?'

'No.'

'Monsieur Falcone, were you nervous? Excited?'

'It wasn't that. I would rather not have been in Andrée's presence, especially while several people were watching.'

'Were you afraid of giving yourself away?'

'I was uncomfortable.'

'Who was in the store when you came in?'

'I remember a child to whom I paid no attention, one of the Molard sisters and an old woman with a squint whom everyone calls La Louchote.'

'Was old Madame Despierre there?'

'I didn't see her.'

'Did you wait your turn?'

'No. Andrée immediately asked me, "And what can I get you, Tony?"'

'She waited on you before the others? No one objected?'

'It's customary. Just about everywhere, they serve the men first.'

'I said, "A kilo of sugar and two packets of soap powder." She fetched them from the shelves, then said, "Wait a minute, I got in the plum jam your

wife's been asking after for two weeks." She disappeared into the back room and returned with a pot of jam of the same brand I usually saw at home ...'

'Was she gone long?'

'Not very long.'

'One minute? Two?'

'The time seemed normal to me.'

'Long enough to pick up a pot of jam and bring it into the shop? Or to look around for it among other piles of things?'

'Between the two. I don't know.'

'Did Andrée Despierre show any emotion?'

'I avoided looking at her.'

'Still, you saw her at some point. You heard her voice.'

'I think she was glad to see me.'

'She said nothing more to you?'

'When I was opening the door, she called out after me, "Have a good day, Tony!"'

'Did her voice sound natural?'

'At the time, I wasn't paying any attention. It was a day like any other.'

'And afterwards?'

'Perhaps her voice sounded more affectionate.'

'Did Andrée ever behave affectionately towards you?'

Wasn't he obliged to tell the truth?

'Yes. It's hard to explain. With a particular kind of affection, like the kind I show Marianne on certain days, for example.'

'Maternal affection?'

'That's not it either. "Protective" might be closer.'

'So, the first coincidence: your wife asks you, rather exceptionally, to go to the grocery store in her place. Second coincidence: the kitchen has been out of a certain jam, which only she eats, for several weeks. There's been a delivery at the store, and you're given a pot. Third coincidence, which Inspector Mani did not fail to point out: that day you did not go straight home but stopped by the station.'

‘I’d had the piston sent to me express mail and—’

‘That’s not all. The station at Saint-Justin, like most buildings, has four sides: one facing the tracks; the one on the opposite side, through which passengers come and go; and a third, on the left, with the stationmaster’s door. The fourth side, to the north, has neither door nor window. It’s a bare wall, a blind wall, and it’s beside this wall that you parked your van.’

‘If you’ve been there, you must know it’s the logical place to park.’

‘The stationmaster, busy with paperwork, told you to get your package yourself from the freight room.’

‘All the local people did that.’

‘How long were you in or near the station?’

‘I didn’t look at the time. A few minutes.’

‘The stationmaster has said that he heard your car leave only after a rather long time.’

‘I wanted to make sure that they’d sent me the right piston, because they make mistakes fairly often.’

‘You opened the package?’

‘Yes.’

‘In the van?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where no one could see you? Let’s add this coincidence to the others. Home again, you place your purchases on the kitchen table. Your wife, in the garden, was taking the laundry off the lines and putting it in a basket. Did you go outside to her? Kiss her before leaving again?’

‘That wasn’t our way. I wasn’t going off on a trip. I called to her from the doorway, “See you this evening!”’

‘You didn’t tell her that the jam had arrived?’

‘Why would I? She’d find it on the table.’

‘You didn’t linger in the kitchen at all?’

‘At the last moment, I saw the coffee pot set at the side of the burner and poured myself a cup.’

‘If I’m not mistaken, that makes at least the fifth coincidence.’

Why was Diem making such a big point of all this? Tony could not change what had happened. What did they want from him? Protests, outrage? He had got past all that long ago. Now he answered their questions impassively. The weather was as dreary and damp as it had been on that 17 February, with its flat grey sky, its dull light, the empty-looking countryside, the puddles left by a recent downpour.

‘Why did you go through Triant?’

‘Because it was on my way.’

‘You had no other reason?’

‘I wanted to talk to my brother.’

‘To ask his advice? Did you often do that, even though you are the elder brother?’

‘I’d talk to him now and then about my business. Besides, he was the only one who knew of my difficulties with Andrée.’

‘So you admit that there were problems?’

‘Her letters worried me.’

‘Isn’t that rather an understatement, given what you admitted to Mani?’

‘Let’s say that they frightened me.’

‘And you came to a decision? That’s what you wanted to talk to Vincent about? It so happens, Monsieur Falcone, that while you were talking with him, your sister-in-law was out doing her shopping, and Françoise was upstairs cleaning the rooms.’

‘It’s like that every morning. When I walked into the café, Vincent wasn’t there either. I heard the clinking of bottles in the cellar and saw the trap door open behind the counter. My brother was bringing up the day’s wine, and I waited for him.’

‘Without telling him you were there?’

‘I didn’t want to interrupt him. And I had time to wait. I sat near the window and thought about what I would say to Garcia.’

‘You’d come to ask for your brother’s advice, but you’d already made up your mind?’

‘More or less.’

‘Explain yourself.’

‘I expected Garcia to hesitate, because he’s a cautious man who retreats easily. Which meant that it was a toss-up for me.’

‘You were gambling with your future and that of your family?’

‘Yes. If Garcia could be convinced, I would sell. If he refused to risk the venture, I’d stay put.’

‘And your brother in all this?’

‘I wanted to let him know how things stood.’

‘Without any witnesses, not even your sister-in-law, so that, aside from Vincent and you, no one can tell us about that conversation. You’re very close to your brother, aren’t you?’

Tony remembered the time when he used to take his little brother to school along muddy or frozen roads. They wore heavy pea-jackets. In the winter it was dark when they left home and still dark when they returned. Tired, Vincent often dragged his feet in their hobnail shoes and had to be tugged along. Tony would keep an eye on him from a distance during play time, and back at La Boisselle, waiting for their father, he was the one who made his brother’s bread-and-butter snack. But such things, such simple things, cannot simply be explained with words: one must have personally experienced them. And Diem had not.

Vincent was certainly the person with whom he felt the closest bond of understanding, and Vincent in turn appreciated the way he did not lord it over him as the older brother. Speaking Italian to each other was another tie between them, linking them to the days when, as children, they spoke only that language with their mother.

‘Vincent, I’m afraid that if I stay, I’ll never have any peace.’

‘She didn’t say anything to you, this morning?’

‘We weren’t alone in the store. I expect I’ll get another letter in two or three days, and God knows what will be in it!’

‘How will you explain things to Gisèle?’

‘I haven’t thought about that yet. If I tell her that there are no opportunities to expand my business in this area, she’ll believe me.’

They had had a vermouth together, talking across the bar counter, and when a delivery man had arrived with some bottled lemonade, Tony had headed out of the door, which was still standing open.

‘It’s in God’s hands!’ Vincent had called after him.

Diem found it hard to believe that the brothers had talked things over so matter-of-factly; perhaps it was because they had experienced so much misfortune, even when they were little children.

‘He didn’t try to dissuade you?’

‘On the contrary, he seemed relieved. He’d been unhappy about my affair with Andrée from the start.’

‘Go on with your schedule on that day.’

‘I spent hardly any time at Ambasse, which was just a small winter fair. After handing out a few brochures, I went on to Bolin-sur-Sièvre, where I had an appointment with my customer.’

‘One moment. Did your wife know his name?’

‘I don’t remember telling her that.’

‘When you went off on your rounds, didn’t you let her know where you’d be, in case she had to contact you?’

‘Not necessarily. For the fairs, it was easy, because I always went to the same cafés. When I visited farms, she had a general idea where I was and could telephone around for me.’

‘You didn’t mention Poitiers to her?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because nothing was definite yet, and I didn’t want her worrying for nothing.’

‘It never occurred to you simply to confess the truth and tell her how worried you were about your affair with Andrée Despierre? Since this affair was over, according to you, wouldn’t that have been best? You never considered that?’

No. An absurd, foolish answer perhaps, but it was the truth.

‘At Bolin-sur-Sièvre I had lunch with my customer, Dambois, who has a good-sized farm, and I finished the repair job by two o’clock, so I wasn’t in

a rush when I drove off to Poitiers.'

'How had you set up your appointment with your friend Garcia?'

'I'd written to him the previous Saturday to let him know I'd pick him up after work. Garcia was my foreman when I worked at the main warehouse. He's about ten years older than I am, with three children, including a son at the local lycée.'

'Go on.'

'I was quite early. I could have visited the assembly workshop, but I'd have had to talk to everyone I knew there and I didn't have the heart. The factory is two kilometres from the city, on the Angoulême road. I went on to Poitiers and went to see a newsreel.'

'At what time did you leave the cinema?'

'Half past four.'

'When did you leave your brother that morning?'

'A little before ten.'

'In other words, most unusually, from ten in the morning until half past four, no one, not your wife or anyone else, knew where to reach you?'

'It never struck me that way.'

'Suppose your daughter had had a serious accident ... Well, let's get on with it! You went to wait for Garcia outside the factory gate.'

'Yes. My letter had interested him. We considered going to the café across the street, but we'd have known too many people there. Since Garcia had his motorbike with him, he followed me into Poitiers as far as the Brasserie du Globe.'

'So no one knew you were there, either? Not even your brother?'

'No. Garcia and I exchanged news about our families, after which I explained my offer to him.'

'Did you tell him why you wanted to leave Saint-Justin?'

'Only that it had to do with a woman. I was aware that he had money set aside and that he'd spoken several times about setting up on his own. I was presenting him with a complete package: house, shed, equipment, plus an already thriving business and customer base.'

'Was he tempted?'

‘He didn’t give me a definite answer, wanted a week to think about it. Above all he had to discuss it with his wife and oldest son. What bothered him the most was having to leave Poitiers, especially because of the boy, who had friends there and was doing well at his studies. I pointed out that there was a good school in Triant. He shot back, “With a fifteen-kilometre roundtrip, unless we board him there!”’

‘How long did this discussion last?’

‘Until about seven. Garcia invited me to dinner, but I told him my wife was waiting.’

‘If Garcia had taken you up on your offer that following week, what were you planning to do?’

‘I’d have asked the company to make me a representative in the north or east, in Alsace, for example, as far as possible from Saint-Justin. And they’d have done it, because they value my work. One day, perhaps, I might have set up on my own again.’

‘You’d have left your father alone out at La Boisselle?’

‘Vincent is close by.’

‘Would you like to take a short break, Monsieur Falcone?’

‘May I open the window?’

He needed air. He had felt suffocated right from the start of this interrogation, which appeared quite banal, but there was something threatening and unreal about having to speak so precisely about things rooted in a tragedy that was never mentioned.

‘Cigarette?’

He took one and stared out at the street, at the windows and wet roofs across the way. If only this were the last time! But even if Diem never mentioned it again, he would still have to start all over in court.

He sat down heavily.

‘We’re almost at the end, Falcone.’

With a sad smile, he nodded at the magistrate, in whom he thought he sensed a certain compassion.

‘You came directly home to Saint-Justin? Without stopping anywhere?’

‘Suddenly, all I wanted was to get home to my wife and daughter. I think I drove very fast. Normally it takes about an hour and a half to cover the distance, and I did it in less than an hour.’

‘Had you had anything to drink with Garcia?’

‘He had two aperitifs, I had a single vermouth.’

‘As with your brother.’

‘Yes.’

‘You drove past his place. You didn’t stop to tell him how your appointment had gone?’

‘No. Anyway, at that hour the café was always crowded, and Vincent would certainly have been busy.’

‘It was dark out. You saw the lights of Saint-Justin in the distance. Did you notice anything?’

‘I was surprised to see all the windows of my house lit up, which we never did, and I felt sure something awful had happened.’

‘What did you think that might be?’

‘My daughter ...’

‘Not your wife?’

‘The way I saw it, Marianne was naturally the most fragile, the most at risk of an accident.’

‘Without trying to drive your car to the shed, you left it some twenty metres from the house.’

‘Half the village was gathered in front of our gate, so I knew it was bad.’

‘You had to make your way through the crowd.’

‘It made way for me, but instead of looking at me sympathetically everyone was angry, glaring at me, and I didn’t understand. Didier, the fat blacksmith in his leather apron, even stepped in front of me with his hands on his hips – and spat on my shoes.

‘While I was crossing the lawn, I felt threatened by the muttering behind me. The door opened as I reached it, and I knew the gendarme standing there, I’d often seen him at the market in Triant. “In there!” he barked at me. He pointed to the door of my office.

‘I found Sergeant Langre sitting at my desk. Instead of calling me Tony, as he always did, he said nastily, “Sit down, you bastard!”

‘That’s when I shouted, “Where’s my wife? Where’s my daughter?” And he said, “Your wife? You know as well as I do where she is!”’

He fell silent. He couldn’t get the words out any more. He was not upset, but uncannily calm.

Diem stopped questioning him; the clerk studied the tip of his pencil.

‘I just don’t know, Your Honour, it’s so mixed up ... Langre told me at some point that Marianne had been taken away by the Molard sisters, so I stopped worrying about her.

‘Then he yelled at me, “Admit it, you knew and you didn’t expect to find them alive! Fucking foreigner! You sonofabitch!”

‘He’d stood up, and I saw he was just itching to hit me. I shouted again, “Where is my wife?”

““In the hospital at Triant,” he snapped, “as if you didn’t know!”

‘Then he looked at his watch: “Only, by this time, I doubt she’s still alive. We’ll know soon. And where were you, all day long? Hiding, eh? Didn’t want to see it! We were wondering if you’d come back or if you might have run away.”

““Did Gisèle have an accident?” I asked. He said, “Accident? That’s a good one! You killed her, that’s what you did! And were careful not to be around when it happened.”’

By this time, the lieutenant had driven up.

‘What does he say?’

‘He’s playing the innocent, as I expected. Champion liars, these Italians. To listen to him, he hasn’t a clue what happened here.’

The lieutenant was no less hostile than the sergeant, but he tried to stay calm and professional.

‘Where have you been?’

‘Poitiers.’

‘What did you do all day? We tried to reach you just about everywhere.’

‘At what time?’

‘From 4.30 on.’

‘What happened at 4.30?’

‘Dr Riquet telephoned us.’

Tony suddenly lost control of himself.

‘Lieutenant, tell me exactly what’s happened! Has my wife had an accident?’

Then Lieutenant Joris had looked him in the eye.

‘Are you playing games with us?’

‘No, I swear, on my daughter’s head and I’m begging you, tell me how my wife is! Is she alive?’

Joris looked at his watch, too.

‘She was alive until forty-five minutes ago. I was at her bedside.’

‘She’s dead?’

He could not believe it. The house was full of strange noises, heavy footsteps upstairs ...

‘What are all these men doing in my house?’

‘Searching, although we’ve already found what we were looking for.’

‘I want to see my wife.’

‘You’ll do as we tell you. As of this moment, Antonio Falcone, you are under arrest.’

‘What for?’

‘I’m asking the questions here.’

Collapsing into a chair, he put his head in his hands. Still without knowing exactly what had happened, he had then been obliged to tell the police about his entire day from the moment he had awakened.

‘You admit that you were the one who brought home this pot of jam?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Had your wife asked you to?’

‘No. She’d asked me to buy some sugar and washing powder. It was Andrée Despierre who gave me the jam that Gisèle, it seems, had been expecting for a fortnight.’

‘Did you come here directly from the grocery store?’

The package at the post office ... The replacement piston ...

‘Is this the same pot of jam?’

They thrust it at his face. The pot had been opened, and a large amount of jam was gone.

‘I think so. The label is the same.’

‘You personally handed it to your wife?’

‘I put it on the kitchen table.’

‘Without mentioning it?’

‘I didn’t see the need. My wife was busy getting laundry off the line.’

‘When were you last inside your shed?’

‘This morning, shortly before eight, to get my van.’

‘You took nothing else from there? You were alone?’

‘My daughter was waiting for me in front of the house.’

All that was so recent – yet so long ago! The entire day, going here and there, was becoming unreal.

‘And this, Falcone: you recognize it?’

He looked at the tin, which he knew well, since it had spent the last four years sitting on the top shelf in the shed.

‘That looks like mine, yes.’

‘What’s in it?’

‘Poison.’

‘Do you know what kind?’

‘Some arsenic or strychnine. That’s from the first year we lived here. Where the shed is now, that used to be landfill, where the butcher dumped his rubbish. The rats had got used to coming around, and Madame Despierre—’

‘Wait. Which? The old lady or the other one?’

‘The mother. She sold me the same poison she sells all the farmers. I don’t remember any more if it’s ...’

‘It’s strychnine. How much of it did you mix with the jam?’

Tony did not go crazy. He did not scream or howl, either, but he did clench his teeth so fiercely that one of them cracked.

‘At what time, normally, would your wife have had some of the jam?’

He heard himself reply, as if from a great distance.

‘Around ten o’clock ...’

Ever since they had moved to the country and she began rising early, Gisèle had made herself a mid-morning snack. Before Marianne had started school, they had eaten one together, the way they still had a snack when she came home in the afternoon.

‘So you knew!’

‘Knew what?’

‘That she would be eating jam at ten o’clock. Do you know what a fatal dose of strychnine is? Two centigrams. And you probably know that ten or fifteen minutes after ingestion, the poison takes effect with the first convulsions. Where were you at ten o’clock?’

‘Just leaving my brother’s place.’

‘Well, your wife was lying on the kitchen floor. She remained alone in the house, without help, until your daughter came home from school at four. So she lay dying for six hours before anyone could come to her aid. Very well organized, don’t you think?’

‘You mean she’s dead?’

‘Yes, Falcone. I believe you know all this already. After the first crisis she probably felt some relief. That’s what Dr Riquet thinks. I don’t know why she didn’t immediately call for help. Later, when the convulsions returned, they would be relentless until the end.

‘Coming home soon after four, your daughter found her mother lying on the floor in a state I would rather not describe to you. Hysterical, the girl ran in terror to pound on the door of the Molard ladies. Léonore came here to see for herself and called the doctor. Where were you at 4.15?’

‘In a cinema in Poitiers ...’

‘Riquet diagnosed poisoning and sent for an ambulance. It was too late for a stomach pump; all they could do was sedate her.

‘Riquet also called me and told me about the pot of jam. While waiting for the ambulance, he’d nosed around the kitchen. Bread, a knife, a cup with the remains of some café au lait and a plate with smears of jam were still on the table. He tasted the jam with the tip of his tongue.’

‘I want to see her! I want to see my daughter!’

‘As for your daughter, now is not the moment, because you might be torn to pieces by the crowd: Léonore Molard had nothing better to do than run door to door with the news. Out in the shed, my men found this tin of strychnine, and I contacted the public prosecutor at Poitiers.

‘Now, Falcone, you will come with me. The police station would be more suitable for continuing this interrogation properly. Since you will doubtless not be returning here for a long time, I advise you to pack a suitcase with some clothes and personal effects. I will go upstairs with you.’

With question after question, Diem made him retell this story, describing his departure from Saint-Justin-du-Loup, suitcase in hand, through the throng of onlookers muttering angrily as he passed, while some stared wild-eyed at him, as if the discovery of a murderer in the village meant that any one of them could have been the victim.

‘The law requires that you identify the body.’

He had had to wait out in a corridor of the hospital with the lieutenant and a gendarme. He was already in handcuffs but not yet used to them, and they hurt him whenever he moved too suddenly.

Studying him with particular attention, Diem observed, ‘When they let you see your wife’s body, after they’d finished laying her out, you stood a few steps away from her, completely still, without a word. Isn’t that what a guilty man would do, Monsieur Falcone?’

How could he explain it to the magistrate? At that moment, in his heart, he had indeed felt guilty. He tried to tell him so, in a way ...

‘She died, after all, because of me.’



7.

That interrogation, in the chambers of Examining Magistrate Diem, proved to be the last. The magistrate may have intended to question Tony again on certain points, or to confront him another time with Andrée, but what he was told about the prisoner's condition persuaded him to abandon any such thought.

Two days later, visiting him in his cell, Professor Bigot had already found a man indifferent to words, indifferent to everything, who appeared to have lapsed into a vegetative state.

His blood pressure had dropped significantly, and the psychiatrist had sent him for observation to the infirmary, where, in spite of intensive treatment, his state did not really improve.

He slept, ate, made a semblance of replying when spoken to, but in a colourless, impersonal voice.

His brother's visit had not awakened him from his prostration. Tony looked at him in amazement, surprised, it seemed, to see Vincent – as he knew him, as he was in his café in Triant – suddenly appear within the alien world of the infirmary.

‘You mustn't let yourself lose heart, Tony. Don't forget that you have a daughter and that your family's all with you.’

What was the use?

‘Marianne’s settling in quite well with us. We’d sent her away to school, at first.’

‘Did they tell her?’ he’d asked dully.

‘There was no way to prevent her classmates from talking. One evening she asked me, “Is it true Pop killed Mama?” So I reassured her, told her absolutely not.

“Is he still a murderer anyway?”

“Of course not, since he didn’t kill anyone.”

“Then why’s his picture in the paper?”

‘You see, Tony? She doesn’t really understand, so she isn’t suffering ...’

Was it the end of May, or the beginning of June? He no longer counted the days, or even the weeks, and when Demarié came to tell him that he had been charged, along with Andrée, with the murders of Nicolas and Gisèle, he showed no reaction at all.

‘They decided against separate trials, which will make it harder for the defence.’

His condition remained unchanged. Sent back to his cell, instead of rebelling against the monotony of prison life, he adapted with impressive docility.

Then overnight all visits ceased; the days were empty, the guards themselves less numerous. The judicial recess had coincided with summer holidays, and hundreds of thousands of people were out on the roads, hurrying to the beaches, the mountains, the cottages tucked away in the countryside.

The newspapers had picked up the scent of a quarrel that would dominate the trial, they hinted: the battle of the expert witnesses.

After an anonymous letter and the subsequent investigations in Triant, which had confirmed the liaison between Tony and Andrée, Nicolas had been exhumed. The first forensic tests had been carried out by a specialist in Poitiers, Dr Gendre, who reported finding a massive amount of strychnine in the body.

Twelve days after Tony’s imprisonment, an arrest warrant had been issued for Andrée Despierre.

The lawyer she had chosen, Maître Capade, had called in a world-famous Parisian specialist, Professor Schwartz, who severely criticized his colleague's work and reached far less damning conclusions.

In three months, Nicolas had been exhumed two times and there was talk of a third, for the police forensic laboratory at Lyons, consulted in turn, demanded fresh evidence.

Discussion centred as well on the mild sedatives taken every evening by the grocer of Saint-Justin if he felt a fit coming on. When questioned, the pharmacist at Triant who had supplied them had confirmed that since the two halves of the capsules were not solidly joined, they could easily be opened and filled with something else.

What did all this have to do with Tony? He no longer even cared whether he was found guilty or not, or, if guilty, what the sentence would be.

On 14 October, the crowd in the courtroom of the Assizes and the many lawyers gathered there seemed startled by his attitude, while the newspapers claimed he was both heartless and shameless.

They were sitting on the same bench, he and Andrée, with a gendarme between them, and Andrée had leaned a little forwards to say, 'Hello, Tony!'

He had neither turned nor winced at the sound of her voice.

The defence lawyers and their clerks were fussing over their papers on a bench in the well of the court. In addition to Capade, Andrée had hired one of the great orators of the Parisian bar, Maître Follier, at whom the spectators gawped as if he were a film star.

The presiding judge had silky grey hair; one of his associate judges, a very young man, seemed nervous, while the other spent his time doodling.

Tony observed all this in a detached way, almost as if he were in a train staring out of a window at the landscape streaming past. The jurors fascinated him, and he studied each in turn for so long that, by the second session, he was familiar with the slightest detail of their faces.

Standing with a respectful demeanour, he answered the preliminary questions reluctantly, with the same neutral tone he had taken way back in

catechism class. Here, too, was he not reciting by heart answers he had supplied many times before?

The first witness called was La Louchote, and it turned out that she had been the first, on a day when she was leaving the train station at Triant, to see Andrée going inside the Hôtel des Voyageurs via the little door on Rue Gambetta.

As chance would have it, she had been in Rue Gambetta two hours later just as Andrée was leaving, and when she had gone inside the café to wait, as she was too early for her train home, who should be there but Tony.

That was how it all started, all those rumours Falcone had learned about only much later. It was Inspector Mani who had finally, so patiently, tracked her down.

One after another they came and went, men and women he knew, many of whom he called by their first names, some of whom he had known since school. They had all dressed in their Sunday best and sometimes their responses, or their unwittingly comical behaviour, provoked ripples of laughter in the court.

Motionless and impassive, old Angelo was there in the second row, where he would sit in the same seat all through the trial. Vincent would join him after giving his evidence; until then, he had to wait in a room with other witnesses, among whom were Françoise and old Madame Despierre.

‘You are the brother of the accused and, as such, you cannot be placed under oath.’

The courtroom was very warm and smelled of unwashed bodies. A young and pretty woman lawyer, Capade’s assistant, kept handing peppermints to him. Once she turned around to offer one to Andrée and then, after a moment’s hesitation, to Tony.

Again, his impressions were of jarring images, of noses, eyes, smiles, yellowed teeth in half-open mouths, the startling red of a woman’s hat, and snatches of sentences he did not bother lining up to find out what they meant.

‘You say that about once a month your brother Tony would join the Despierre woman in a room in your hotel, room 3, which you called the

blue room. Was it your habit to thus welcome such couples in your establishment?’

Poor Vincent, publicly insulted like that, when from the beginning he had begged his brother to break off the affair!

There was something else the presiding judge had said, during Tony’s interrogation.

‘You were so passionately in love with Andrée Despierre that you didn’t hesitate to hide your guilty lovemaking beneath the roof of your brother and sister-in-law.’

It was a hotel, wasn’t it? At times he could not help smiling, as if it were all happening to someone else. Playing to the audience, the presiding judge made harsh or sardonic comments the eager journalists could feed to their papers.

And then Andrée’s famous barrister from Paris, stung, would rise to deliver his own trenchant ripostes.

Demarié had advised Tony to get a second lawyer as well, but he had refused.

He just didn’t see the point. The long-drawn-out tale already pieced together in Diem’s chambers would now be retold for the jury and the public.

The atmosphere was more solemn, with more ritual formulae and flourishes, more actors and bit players, but it was basically the same old story.

The dates were rehashed one by one, along with the comings and goings of all concerned, but when the letters came up there was a general commotion, with squabbling not only between the prosecution and the defence but within each team itself. Every word was dissected and Follier even brandished one volume of Littré’s dictionary to list the various meanings of certain words used every day by everyone.

Andrée, dressed in black, took a more intense interest in the proceedings than Tony did and leaned forwards sometimes to smile at him or give him a knowing look.

The battle of the expert witnesses broke out only on the third day.

‘Until now,’ said the presiding judge, ‘I had always thought that the sale of poisons was strictly regulated and that a doctor’s prescription was required to obtain them. But what do we see in this case?’

‘An old cocoa tin containing more than fifty grams of strychnine, which toxicologists estimate would kill some twenty people, sits in a shed that is open all day long.’

‘And on the shelves in the back room of the Despierre grocery store, next to the food supplies, we find two kilos – you hear me, two kilos! – of the same poison as well as an equally substantial amount of arsenic.’

‘We all deplore this situation,’ replied one of the expert witnesses, ‘but unfortunately, that is the law. Although in pharmacies the sale of poisons is tightly controlled, those used as pesticides are freely sold in agricultural cooperatives, drugstores and some village shops.’

Day in and day out there they all were in their appointed spots: the magistrates, jurors, barristers, gendarmes, journalists and even the onlookers, who must have had some way of retaining the same seats and whom the witnesses, one after the other, would join after their brief turn in the witness box.

Now and then one of the lawyers near the little side door would slip out to defend a client in another court, and during any adjournment the room buzzed like a school playground.

At such times Tony was escorted to a dark room where the only window was three metres high on the wall, and Andrée was doubtless in a similar place. Demarié brought him soft drinks; Tony supposed the magistrates must have had something to drink as well. Then a bell would summon everyone back to their places, as in the theatre or the cinema.

Her complexion more chalk-white than ever, old Madame Despierre made a spectacular entrance. And with her, the judge took a softer tone, for she was, in a way, one of the victims.

‘I never encouraged my son in this marriage, as I knew no good would come of it. Unfortunately, he loved the woman, and I hadn’t the heart to oppose ...’

Why did he remember some words but not others?

‘I am obliged, madame, to remind you of unhappy events and to speak of your son’s death.’

‘If she hadn’t pushed me out of my own house, I would have watched over him, and nothing would have happened. She never loved him, you see. All she wanted was our money. She knew he wouldn’t live long. When she took a lover ...’

‘You were aware of her affair with the accused?’

‘Like everyone else in Saint-Justin, except my poor Nicolas.’

‘In August of last year, he seems to have grown suspicious.’

‘I was so hoping he would catch them in the act and would throw her out – but she managed to twist him around her little finger.’

‘What was your reaction upon finding your son dead?’

‘I felt right away that he hadn’t succumbed to one of his attacks and that his wife was somehow involved.’

‘Of course, you had no proof.’

‘I waited for them to go after his wife.’

She pointed at Tony.

‘It was only a matter of time. And I was right.’

‘Was it not you who, two days after the death of Madame Falcone, sent an anonymous letter to the public prosecutor?’

‘The experts have not formally identified my writing. The note may be from anyone.’

‘Let’s talk about the pot of jam. Who took delivery of it in the shop?’

‘I did, the day before it happened, meaning Tuesday, 16 February.’

‘Did you open it?’

‘No. I knew from the label what it was and I set it aside in the back room.’

This was one of those rare moments when Tony paid attention. He was not the only one to show particular interest in this testimony: his lawyer had risen and moved several steps closer, as if intent on hearing better, perhaps – but in reality in the vain hope of disconcerting the witness.

The answers Madame Despierre was about to give would largely determine Tony’s fate.

‘That morning, at what time did you go to the store?’

‘The morning of the 17th? At seven o’clock, as always.’

‘You saw the package?’

‘It was still in the same place.’

‘Was the string intact and the sealing tape unbroken?’

‘Yes.’

‘You remained at the counter until 7.50, when your daughter-in-law took your place, and you went home for a bite to eat. Is that correct?’

‘It is the truth.’

‘How many people were in the shop when you left it?’

‘Four. I had just served Marguerite Chauchois when I saw that man come across the street towards us. I went home through the garden.’

She was lying. And unable to help herself, she looked defiantly at Tony. If the package was open at that moment, as it certainly was – and all the more obviously if it had been open overnight, as was quite probable, then Andrée had had more than enough time to mix the poison into one of the jam pots.

If, on the contrary, the package was intact, then she could not possibly have poisoned the jam during the minute or two he had stood waiting in the shop.

It was not enough for old Madame Despierre that Andrée should pay for killing Nicolas. Tony had to pay for it as well.

‘May it please Your Honour, I should like—’ began Demarié, as murmuring swelled in the room.

‘You will have ample time to present your case in due course to the jury.’

Tony was not looking at Andrée, but the newspapers claimed that at that moment she had smiled, with what one article described as a “greedy” expression.

For the first time, Tony noticed the Molard sisters sitting way at the back of the courtroom, to the left of the exit, in similar hats and dresses, with identical handbags in their laps, their faces even more moonlike in the dreary courtroom light.

Andrée had preceded Tony in the witness box, where she had proudly declared or, rather, proclaimed to the court and the public, as if making a profession of faith, 'I did not poison my husband, but if he had taken too long to die, then perhaps I would have. I loved Tony and I love him still.'

'How did you mean to get rid of Madame Falcone?'

'That had nothing to do with me. I wrote so to Tony. I told him: "Now you!" I had confidence, and waited.'

'Waited for what?'

'Waited for him to free himself, as we'd decided he would as soon as I gained my freedom.'

'You did not anticipate that he would kill her?'

Then, holding her head high, she had exclaimed in her rich, throaty voice, 'We love each other!'

So great was the uproar that the judge had threatened to clear the court.

The die had been cast on the very first day. And that was not the day Nicolas died, or the day of Gisèle's agonizing death.

The first day had been 2 August of the previous year, when Tony, naked and self-satisfied in the scorching heat of the blue room, stood in front of a mirror showing him Andrée lying as if splayed wide open.

'Did I hurt you?'

'No.'

'Are you angry with me?'

'No.'

'Is your wife going to ask you any questions?'

'I don't think so.'

'Does she ever ask any?'

Gisèle was still alive, and, shortly after those words were spoken, he would go home to her and Marianne in their new house.

'You have a beautiful back. Do you love me, Tony?'

'I think so.'

'You're not sure?'

Had he loved her? A gendarme was sitting between them, and at times she leaned forwards to look at him with that same expression she had worn

in the room at Triant.

‘Would you like to spend your whole life with me?’

‘Sure!’

The words had lost all meaning, yet they were what everyone was carrying on about now with ridiculous solemnity. About things that did not exist. And a man who did not exist, either.

The public prosecutor spoke all afternoon long, finally demanding, his face streaming with sweat, the death penalty for both the accused.

The lawyers for the defence spent the entire next day delivering their closing speeches, and it was eight o’clock when the jury retired to deliberate.

‘We still have a chance,’ insisted Demarié, pacing restlessly around the little room, where Tony was the calmer of the two.

Did the lawyer believe in his innocence? Had he any doubts? It didn’t matter. He kept looking at his watch. By 9.30, the bell that would summon them back to the courtroom had not yet echoed along the corridors.

‘A good sign. When deliberations drag on, it usually means that ...’

They waited for another half an hour before being recalled to their places. One of the ceiling lights had burned out.

‘I remind the public that I will tolerate no disorder.’

The foreman of the jury rose, holding a sheet of paper.

‘In the matter of Andrée Despierre, née Formier, the verdict of the jury on the first count is: yes. On the second count: yes. On the third and the fourth counts: no.’

She had been found guilty of the murder of her husband, with premeditation, but innocent of the death of Gisèle.

‘In the matter of Antoine Falcone, the verdict of the jury ...’

He was found innocent of the murder of Nicolas, but guilty of murdering his wife and in his case, too, the charge of premeditation was considered proven.

While the presiding judge was speaking quietly with his associates, leaning in turn from one to the other, the silence that fell was tense with impatience.

At last the judge pronounced sentence. On the recommendation of the jury, the death penalty for the two accused was commuted to life in prison with hard labour.

In the ensuing tumult, while everyone stood up at once and people shouted to one another all across the courtroom, Andrée rose as well and turned slowly towards Tony.

This time, he was so fascinated by her face that he could not turn away. Never, even when they had been the most closely united as one flesh, had he seen her so radiant and beautiful. Never had her voluptuous mouth smiled at him as it did now, in the triumph of love. Never, with one look, had she possessed him so completely.

‘You see, Tony?’ she exulted. ‘Nothing can part us now!’

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